



Political Elites and Development in Nigeria: 1999 till Date

Henry Omeahon Oigiange & Otti Olubunmi Oris PhD

Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Nigeria

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*Corresponding Author: Otti Olubunmi Oris PhD

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This study examines the role of political elites in shaping Nigeria's development from 1999 to the present, following the transition to democracy. Political elites, including politicians, bureaucrats, and business leaders, significantly influence governance and economic policies, often prioritizing personal interests over public welfare. Despite Nigeria's rich natural resources, high poverty and unemployment levels persist, raising concerns about elite-driven governance effectiveness. Corruption remains a critical issue, with elites frequently misappropriating public funds, undermining development initiatives and eroding trust in institutions. Additionally, ethnic and regional dynamics complicate the political landscape, leading to instability and marginalization of certain groups. Civil society has emerged as a counterforce, advocating for accountability and transparency, yet faces resistance from entrenched elites. Employing elite theory, this study analyzes how elite dominance affects equitable development outcomes, highlighting their dual role as both facilitators and obstacles to progress. The findings emphasize the need for systemic reforms to enhance institutional accountability, promote inclusive governance, and mitigate the adverse effects of elite capture. By engaging citizens and civil society alongside political elites, Nigeria can foster a more equitable political environment that addresses pressing underdevelopment challenges, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities within Nigeria's political economy.

Keywords: Political Elites, Development, Corruption, Governance, Nigeria.

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Introduction

The political landscape of Nigeria has undergone profound changes since the transition to democracy in 1999, marking an era of renewed hope and challenges for the nation. Following decades of military rule, the return to civilian governance was celebrated as a significant milestone in Nigeria's quest for political stability and economic development. However, the emergence of political elites during this period has significantly influenced the trajectory of the country's development. These elites, often

characterized by their control over resources and political power, play a crucial role in shaping policies and decisions that affect the lives of millions of Nigerians (Bolarinwa&Osuji, 2022).

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has faced numerous socio-political and economic challenges. The legacy of colonialism, compounded by ethnic tensions and corruption, has created an intricate web of issues that continue to plague the nation (Osaghae&Suberu, 2005). The military regimes that dominated much of Nigeria's post-independence history



fostered an environment where political participation was limited, and governance was often marked by repression and human rights abuses (Ugochukwu, 2024). As a result, the return to democracy in 1999 was not only a political shift but also a necessary step towards addressing the systemic issues that had hindered development for decades.

The role of political elites in Nigeria cannot be understated. These elites, comprising politicians, bureaucrats, and influential business figures, have significant sway over the political and economic landscape. Their ability to shape public policy and resource allocation has profound implications for development outcomes (Bolarinwa&Osuji, 2022). In a country where wealth is concentrated among a small elite, the decisions made by these individuals can either promote inclusive growth or exacerbate inequality. The political elite's engagement in governance often reflects their interests, leading to policies that may not necessarily align with the broader needs of the populace (Gilens& Page, 2014).

Despite Nigeria's vast natural resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, the country continues to grapple with high levels of poverty and unemployment. As of recent estimates, a significant portion of the population lives below the poverty line, with access to basic services such as education and healthcare remaining limited (World Bank Group, 2024). The wealth generated from natural resources has not translated into widespread economic development, raising questions about the effectiveness of governance and the role of political elites in facilitating or hindering progress. The paradox of a resource-rich nation struggling with development highlights the complexities of the relationship between political elites and economic outcomes.

Corruption remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria, deeply entrenched within the political system. The actions of political elites often prioritize personal gain over public welfare, leading to the misappropriation of funds and resources meant for development (Julius, 2011). Numerous scandals involving high-ranking officials have eroded public trust in government institutions,

further complicating efforts to achieve sustainable development. The lack of accountability and transparency in governance has allowed corrupt practices to thrive, undermining the potential for meaningful change (Nwogbo &Ighodalo, 2021).

Moreover, the political elite's influence extends beyond mere governance; it shapes the very fabric of Nigerian society. Ethnic and regional affiliations often dictate political alignments, creating a landscape where loyalty to personal or group interests supersedes national priorities (Jackson, 2018). This fragmentation can lead to instability, as competing interests clash and hinder collaborative efforts towards development. The challenge of fostering a unified national identity amidst diverse ethnic backgrounds remains a significant barrier to progress (Torhemen et al., 2023).

The civil society landscape in Nigeria has evolved in response to the actions of political elites. Advocacy groups and non-governmental organizations have emerged as critical players in demanding accountability and transparency from those in power (Itodo, &O'Regan, 2018). The rise of social movements and grassroots activism has brought attention to issues of governance, corruption, and human rights, challenging the status quo and pushing for reforms. However, the effectiveness of these movements is often met with resistance from political elites, who may perceive such challenges as threats to their power.

As Nigeria approaches the next phase of its democratic journey, the interplay between political elites and development remains a central concern. The ability of these elites to adapt to changing political dynamics and respond to the needs of the populace will significantly influence the country's future. Engaging the political elite in constructive dialogue and fostering a culture of accountability is essential for promoting inclusive development (Rocha Menocal, 2017). The potential for collaboration between civil society, the private sector, and the government could pave the way for innovative solutions to the pressing challenges facing Nigeria.

Overall, the relationship between political elites and development in Nigeria is complex and dynamic. As the country navigates its post-democratic landscape, understanding the role of these elites is crucial for formulating effective policies that promote equitable development. This study aims to explore this relationship in depth, offering insights into how political elites have shaped Nigeria's developmental outcomes from 1999 to the present.

Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the influence of political elites on Nigeria's developmental outcomes from 1999 to the present. Specifically, the study aims:

- i. To examine the role of political elites in Nigeria's development from 1999 to date.
- ii. To identify the challenges posed by elite dominance in governance.
- iii. To suggest actionable strategies to mitigate elite-driven underdevelopment.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is hinged on the Elite theory. Elite theory offers a lens through which to understand the power dynamics in societies where decision-making is concentrated in the hands of a small, influential group. Originally formulated by classical theorists such as Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, the theory posits that society is divided into two groups: the ruling minority (elites) and the governed majority (Mosca, 1939). Pareto (1935) argues that elites control key resources such as economic, political, and social resources in addition to maintaining their dominance through strategic manipulation and organizational acumen.

In the Nigerian context, elite theory highlights the concentration of political and economic power among a narrow group of individuals who dominate the country's governance structures. These elites include politicians, military leaders,

business magnates, and influential bureaucrats who leverage their positions to consolidate wealth and influence (Ake, 1996). Nigeria's political elites often utilize clientelism, rent-seeking, and patronage systems to maintain their dominance, reflecting the core tenets of elite theory.

Moreover, the theory suggests that elites tend to prioritize their interests over those of the broader populace, which is evident in Nigeria's governance patterns. Developmental policies often align with elite interests, while the needs of marginalized groups are neglected. This underscores the theory's relevance in analyzing how elite dominance affects equitable development outcomes.

The Concept of Political Elites

The concept of political elites has been a critical focus of socio-political and economic studies, particularly in understanding power dynamics in governance. Political elites are defined as individuals or groups who hold significant authority and influence within the political, economic, or social domains of a society. These elites are distinguished not only by their positions of formal authority in government, business, or civil society but also by their capacity to wield substantial informal influence over decision-making processes and governance outcomes (Mosca, 1939). The term encompasses a wide range of actors, including politicians, bureaucrats, business magnates, and influential figures in civil society, whose decisions and actions shape the trajectory of a society's development.

Origins and Evolution of Political Elites

The theoretical foundation for the study of political elites can be traced to classical sociological thinkers such as Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels. Mosca (1939) argued that elites emerge in every organized society due to the necessity of governance and administration. He posited that a minority class inevitably exercises control over the majority, relying on organizational skill,

access to resources, and control of coercive institutions. Similarly, Pareto (1935) introduced the "circulation of elites," highlighting how new elites replace old ones through a dynamic process of social and political change. Michels (1915) contributed the "iron law of oligarchy," suggesting that even in democratic societies, power consolidates within a small group of elites, who dominate decision-making to preserve their interests.

Over time, the concept of elites has been expanded to include their sociocultural and economic dimensions. In modern contexts, political elites are analyzed not only through their formal roles but also their ability to mobilize informal networks and practices to sustain power. These informal networks often include kinship ties, patron-client relationships, and affiliations based on ethnicity, religion, or region, which are particularly significant in societies like Nigeria.

Characteristics of Political Elites

Political elites are identifiable through several distinct characteristics that underscore their dominance and influence in governance and development.

1. Control of Resources

One of the defining features of political elites is their privileged access to and control over critical resources, including financial, natural, and human capital. This control allows them to wield disproportionate power over society, enabling them to maintain and expand their influence (Pareto, 1935). In resource-rich countries like Nigeria, political elites often exercise significant control over natural resources such as oil, leveraging these assets to consolidate their wealth and power. The mismanagement and misappropriation of these resources have been linked to persistent underdevelopment, as elites prioritize personal or group interests over national development goals (Ross, 2001).

2. Policy Influence

Political elites play a central role in shaping governance structures, laws, and policies. Their ability to influence policymaking stems from

their positions of authority and their control over key institutions. Policies crafted under elite dominance often reflect their interests, which can lead to outcomes that perpetuate inequality and hinder inclusive development. In Nigeria, for instance, elite-driven policymaking has been critiqued for its short-term focus and lack of consideration for the broader public good (Ake, 1996).

3. Networks of Patronage

A crucial mechanism through which political elites sustain their power is the establishment and maintenance of patron-client networks. In these relationships, elites provide material or symbolic rewards—such as jobs, contracts, or political appointments—in exchange for loyalty and support from clients or followers. This system of patronage, prevalent in many developing nations, creates a cycle of dependency that entrenches elite power while marginalizing those outside these networks (Kenny, 2015). In Nigeria, patronage politics is a prominent feature of governance, with political elites distributing resources along ethnic, regional, or party lines to secure their positions.

4. Informal Power Structures

Beyond formal authority, political elites often operate through informal power structures, such as traditional leadership roles, religious affiliations, and clandestine alliances. These informal mechanisms enable elites to bypass institutional constraints and manipulate governance processes. In Nigeria, informal networks frequently intersect with formal governance structures, creating a complex web of influence that is resistant to transparency and accountability (Otusanya&Lauwo, 2019).

5. Resilience and Adaptability

Political elites demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability in maintaining their dominance, even in the face of social, economic, or political upheavals (Merkel &Lührmann, 2021). They achieve this by co-opting opposition forces, leveraging emerging opportunities, and aligning themselves with prevailing ideologies or movements. In Nigeria, the adaptability of political elites is evident in their ability to

transition between military and civilian regimes, ensuring their continued relevance across political dispensations.

Methodology

This research utilized a structured review approach to examine the relationship between political elites and development in Nigeria from 1999 till date. Data was collected from various secondary sources, such as academic papers, reports, and official government documents. The analysis applied a content analysis technique, and the findings were categorized into pertinent themes aligned with the defined objectives and discussed accordingly.

Results

The Role of Political Elites in Nigeria's Development (1999 to Date)

The political elites in Nigeria have wielded immense power in shaping the nation's trajectory since the return to democracy in 1999. These individuals, typically occupying key positions in government, business, and civil society, significantly influence economic policies, governance structures, resource allocation, and the overall developmental outcomes of the country. This section examines how these elites have contributed to or hindered Nigeria's development, focusing on their roles in economic reforms, governance, resource management, public welfare, and security.

1. Economic Role of Political Elites: Policies and Resource Management

Political elites in Nigeria have historically influenced economic reforms and policies. Since the early years of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, privatization policies under President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) highlighted the role of elites in resource management. The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), initiated in 2004, sought to reduce public sector dominance in the economy (National Planning Commission, 2004). However, rather than fostering inclusive growth,

the privatization process largely benefited elites with close political connections. For instance, companies like Transcorp, controlled by influential figures such as Tony Elumelu, acquired key public assets, raising questions about transparency and equity in the process.

The oil sector serves as another critical example of elite dominance. Despite being Nigeria's primary revenue source, oil wealth has been concentrated among a small group of elites, with limited trickle-down effects for the broader population. Under Goodluck Jonathan's administration (2010–2015), the mismanagement of oil subsidies culminated in the infamous 2012 fuel subsidy scandal, which exposed how billions of dollars meant to lower fuel prices for ordinary Nigerians were embezzled by politically connected individuals (BBC News, 2012).

Under Muhammadu Buhari, initiatives like the Anchor Borrowers' Program aimed to diversify the economy and reduce oil dependency by promoting agriculture. However, critics argue that these initiatives were co-opted by elites who diverted funds meant for farmers, perpetuating systemic inequalities. These patterns align with Ross's (2003) "resource curse" theory, which posits that resource-rich countries often experience weak governance and elite capture, undermining equitable economic development.

2. Governance and Political Stability

Political elites in Nigeria have historically played a pivotal role in shaping governance and ensuring political stability, albeit often at the expense of democratic values. Their influence on Nigeria's political trajectory since the Fourth Republic has been marked by strategic alliances, rivalries, and practices that both stabilize and challenge the nation's democratic consolidation.

One notable example of elites preserving constitutional democracy occurred during Olusegun Obasanjo's administration. In 2006, Obasanjo attempted to amend the constitution to extend his tenure for a third term. This move was widely viewed as a potential threat to Nigeria's nascent democracy. However, elite opposition

within the National Assembly, led by figures like Ken Nnamani, the then-Senate President, resisted this agenda, ultimately safeguarding Nigeria's democratic framework (Egobueze et al., 2020). This resistance highlights the capacity of elites to act as a check against authoritarianism when their interests align with democratic principles.

Another instance where political elites bolstered democratic stability was the peaceful transition of power in 2015. The concession by Goodluck Jonathan to Muhammadu Buhari following the presidential elections marked a watershed moment in Nigeria's democracy (Kendhammer, 2015). It underscored elite commitment to respecting electoral outcomes, even amid accusations of electoral malpractice. Such instances have helped reinforce Nigeria's democratic norms and encourage peaceful transitions of power.

While elites have contributed to stability, their practices often undermine democratic ideals. Electoral manipulation, godfatherism, and the dominance of informal power structures have become entrenched in Nigeria's political system (Nnaji&Iheji, 2024). These practices limit grassroots participation, perpetuate elite dominance, and create a political environment where loyalty to influential figures outweighs competence or public accountability.

Bola Ahmed Tinubu, now Nigeria's president, exemplifies the enduring influence of political elites. Before his presidency, Tinubu was a prominent godfather in Lagos politics (Luqman&Busari, 2023). His control over Lagos State's political machinery ensured his influence extended beyond the region, shaping national politics. Tinubu played a central role in the formation of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the eventual victory of Buhari in the 2015 presidential election (Ashindorbe& Albert, 2023). Tinubu's political strategies—centered on building alliances and leveraging his extensive network—highlight the dual nature of elite influence. While his efforts contributed to the unification of opposition forces and political stability, they also reinforced oligarchic tendencies, where power remains concentrated among a select few.

The practice of godfatherism, as embodied by Tinubu and others, undermines democracy by prioritizing loyalty over merit. Political godfathers often dictate the selection of candidates for electoral positions, bypassing internal party democracy. This trend has stifled the emergence of competent leaders and perpetuated corruption, as loyalty to godfathers often requires subservience to their interests. The dominance of elite-driven politics fosters a system where citizens' voices are marginalized, and governance outcomes are tailored to elite agendas.

Political elites have also been implicated in electoral malpractice (Omojowo et al., 2024). Controversies surrounding Nigeria's elections often involve elite manipulation of electoral commissions, voter rolls, and security forces. For example, allegations of vote-buying and ballot-box snatching during the 2019 elections point to the pervasive role of elites in undermining electoral integrity (Omilusi, 2023). Such practices erode public trust in democracy and further entrench elite impunity.

Despite these challenges, elites have occasionally fostered stability within political factions. Tinubu's presidency, which began in 2023, is a testament to the strategic manoeuvres of political elites to maintain influence while navigating Nigeria's diverse ethno-religious landscape. Tinubu's alliances with influential leaders across regions reflect an effort to stabilize Nigeria's polarized polity. Whether his presidency will address the systemic issues of elite dominance or perpetuate them remains to be seen.

3. Corruption and Public Resource Allocation

Corruption is a hallmark of elite dominance in Nigeria. Since 1999, political elites have been implicated in numerous scandals involving the embezzlement of public funds. The Dasuki arms procurement scandal is a case in point, where Sambo Dasuki, the former National Security Adviser, was accused of diverting \$2.1 billion meant for military hardware to political cronies during Jonathan's administration (Okoko et al., 2024). Furthermore, Ojo et al. (2020) asserted

that this scandal not only weakened Nigeria's defense capabilities but also exacerbated the Boko Haram insurgency by leaving the military underfunded.

The anti-corruption drive under Buhari's administration exposed the contradictions of elite accountability. While the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) prosecuted high-profile cases, critics argue that the agency targeted opposition figures disproportionately, reflecting elite influence over ostensibly neutral institutions (Nwosu-Iheme, 2021). Examples include the selective prosecution of PDP members while APC figures facing similar allegations were shielded.

4. Infrastructure Development: Elite Priorities and Gaps

Infrastructure development has been a central focus of Nigerian governments since the Fourth Republic, often presented as a means of addressing pressing developmental challenges. Successive administrations have prioritized high-profile projects to demonstrate progress, many of which have been championed by political elites. The Lagos-Ibadan railway project, initially conceptualized during Goodluck Jonathan's administration and completed under Muhammadu Buhari's government, is one such example (Shaibume & Patrick, 2023). This project aimed to enhance connectivity between Lagos, Nigeria's economic hub, and the rest of the country. Similarly, the Second Niger Bridge, a long-awaited infrastructure project linking the Southeast to other regions, has served as a symbol of elite commitment to addressing regional disparities (Obebe et al., 2020). These projects showcase how elite-backed initiatives can contribute to the nation's infrastructure and foster economic development when adequately executed.

However, the success of these projects often stands in contrast to numerous elite-driven infrastructure ventures that have failed to meet expectations. The Ajaokuta Steel Mill, for instance, exemplifies the persistent inefficiencies that characterize elite-managed projects (Adamuet *al.*, 2022). Despite decades of

investment and potential to boost Nigeria's industrial sector, the mill remains incomplete. Mismanagement, corruption, and political interference have hampered its development, with elites often prioritizing personal gain over the project's economic potential. This case underscores how elite interests can derail national priorities, perpetuating underdevelopment despite significant resource allocation.

Corruption within elite circles exacerbates the challenges of infrastructure development. For example, inflated contracts, poorly executed projects, and frequent delays are common issues that undermine the quality and impact of such initiatives. The Abuja-Kano road reconstruction project has faced significant delays and cost overruns, drawing criticism for the lack of transparency in contract awards and execution (Obebe, 2020). Elite actors, wielding their influence over public funds, often divert resources intended for infrastructure development toward personal or political objectives. These practices erode public trust and limit the transformative potential of infrastructure projects.

Elite-driven infrastructure projects in Nigeria are thus marked by a dichotomy of potential and pitfalls. While some projects address critical developmental needs, others highlight the inefficiencies and corruption that hinder sustainable progress.

5. Democratic Consolidation and Electoral Integrity

Political elites have shaped Nigeria's democratic journey by influencing electoral processes and institutions. While peaceful transfers of power, such as Jonathan's concession to Buhari in 2015, reflect elite commitment to democratic principles, electoral malpractice remains widespread. The role of elites in manipulating electoral commissions, voter rolls, and ballot outcomes undermines Nigeria's electoral integrity. For instance, the controversies surrounding the 2019 presidential elections, including allegations of rigging by both major

parties, highlight elite complicity in electoral fraud (Hartnett, 2020).

Judicial independence, a cornerstone of democratic governance, is also compromised by elite interference. The removal of Chief Justice Walter Onnoghen in 2019, allegedly for failing to declare assets, was perceived as politically motivated and indicative of elite domination over the judiciary (Abdula, 2023). Such incidents undermine public trust in governance and perpetuate elite impunity.

6. Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation

Social welfare programs are often used by political elites as tools for political gain rather than genuine poverty alleviation. Jonathan's Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Program (SURE-P), launched after the partial removal of fuel subsidies in 2012, aimed to provide job opportunities and improve infrastructure (Chinenye&Ngonadi, 2017). However, the program was marred by elite mismanagement, with funds diverted to politically connected contractors.

Similarly, Buhari's National Social Investment Program (NSIP) sought to reduce poverty through initiatives like TraderMoni and N-Power (Ikakah&Olumese, 2021). While these programs temporarily alleviated poverty, their long-term impact was undermined by elite nepotism, with beneficiaries often selected based on political affiliations rather than need.

7. Security Challenges and National Cohesion

The role of political elites in addressing security challenges is fraught with contradictions. Elite complicity in fostering insecurity is exemplified by allegations against Ali Modu Sheriff, former governor of Borno State, who was accused of enabling Boko Haram's rise through indirect support (Queiroz, 2022). This highlights how elite interests can exacerbate rather than mitigate insecurity.

Ethno-regional tensions, often exploited by elites, further threaten national cohesion. The rise of separatist movements like the Indigenous

People of Biafra (IPOB) under NnamdiKanu reflects longstanding grievances over elite neglect of the Southeast (Nimfel&Anjide, 2022). Rather than addressing these grievances through dialogue and development, elite-driven military crackdowns have deepened regional distrust.

8. Civil Society Engagement and Accountability

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have emerged as critical counterweights to elite dominance in Nigeria. The End SARS protests of 2020 exemplify grassroots resistance to elite impunity, particularly in the security sector. The elite response, including the deployment of military forces against protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate, revealed their unwillingness to embrace reform demands (Fasakin, 2022).

Despite such resistance, CSOs like BudgIT and SERAP continue to push for greater transparency in governance (Ugbudu&Jev,2021). These organizations leverage data-driven advocacy to expose elite corruption and promote accountability. For instance, BudgIT's 2022 report on budgetary discrepancies highlighted how billions of naira were misallocated, sparking public outcry and policy revisions.

Challenges Posed by Elite Dominance in Governance

Elite dominance in Nigeria's governance landscape has profoundly influenced the nation's development trajectory, often resulting in systemic corruption, electoral malpractice, regional disparities, and weakened institutions. These issues are underpinned by the actions and strategies of a political elite class that prioritizes self-preservation and control over genuine national progress.

Corruption remains one of the most pervasive challenges linked to elite dominance. Nigeria consistently ranks poorly on global corruption indices, largely due to the entrenched culture of elite mismanagement. High-profile cases highlight this dynamic. For example, the Halliburton bribery scandal implicated senior

Nigerian officials who allegedly received millions of dollars in kickbacks in exchange for lucrative contracts (Gbegi&Okoye, 2013). Such practices drain resources from critical development projects and perpetuate a lack of trust in governance structures. Research by Muhammad *et al.* (2023) illustrates how elite corruption in Nigeria not only undermines economic growth but also exacerbates social inequality by diverting public funds to private accounts.

Electoral manipulation is another significant challenge posed by elites. Political elites often exploit their control over institutions to influence electoral outcomes (Acemoglu& Robinson, 2008). For instance, the 2007 general elections, widely regarded as one of the most flawed in Nigeria's history, were marred by ballot box stuffing, voter intimidation, and falsified results orchestrated by elite networks (Suberu, 2007). While subsequent reforms, such as the introduction of biometric voter registration, have sought to curb such practices, elites continue to adapt, employing newer strategies to maintain their grip on power.

Regional disparities, particularly in the Niger Delta, further underscore the negative impact of elite dominance. Despite contributing significantly to Nigeria's oil wealth, the region remains underdeveloped, with high levels of poverty and environmental degradation. Research by Watts (2004) highlights how elites divert oil revenues intended for regional development, fueling unrest and militancy. The case of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) illustrates how marginalized groups resort to violence when elite mismanagement and corruption deny them their fair share of resources.

Institutions designed to promote accountability and transparency have also been co-opted by elites. For instance, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), established to combat corruption, has often been accused of selective prosecution. While cases like the conviction of James Ibori, former governor of Delta State, show progress, such successes are overshadowed by allegations of bias and inefficiency. Ogundiya (2010) notes that this

selective enforcement undermines public trust in anti-corruption initiatives and reinforces a culture of impunity among elites.

Beyond governance, elite dominance affects broader societal structures. Women and youth remain underrepresented in Nigerian politics, a situation perpetuated by elite-controlled networks that prioritize traditional power hierarchies. The 2019 general elections, for example, saw a negligible increase in women's representation, with only 7% of National Assembly seats held by women. Scholars like Okeke (2020) argue that this underrepresentation results from systemic barriers created by elite-driven politics, which marginalize voices outside the established order.

Addressing the challenges posed by elite dominance requires systemic reforms. Strengthening institutions to ensure independence and accountability is essential. Promoting civic education and grassroots participation can empower citizens to demand transparency and challenge elite hegemony. Moreover, international actors can play a role by supporting governance reforms and conditioning aid on measurable improvements in accountability.

Conclusion

This study has explored the complex relationship between political elites and development in Nigeria since the country's return to democracy in 1999. The findings underscore the dual role of political elites as both drivers of development and barriers to equitable progress. On the one hand, elites have facilitated key infrastructure projects, supported democratic consolidation, and promoted regional stability. On the other hand, their prioritization of personal or group interests, compounded by corruption, electoral manipulation, and regional inequalities, has hindered the country's broader development goals. The Niger Delta's persistent underdevelopment, the challenges posed by godfatherism, and the selective enforcement of anti-corruption measures illustrate the detrimental effects of elite dominance on the

country's governance and development outcomes.

Despite the progress made in certain areas, the evidence suggests that the concentration of power in the hands of a few elites has perpetuated systemic corruption, weakened institutions, and exacerbated inequality, particularly in marginalized regions. This has led to a situation where a substantial portion of Nigeria's population continues to suffer from poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of access to basic services, despite the country's vast natural wealth.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need to address the systemic issues that enable elites to maintain their grip on power and resources at the expense of national development. Sustainable development in Nigeria will require not only the participation of political elites but also the active engagement of citizens, civil society organizations, and stronger institutions capable of holding elites accountable.

Recommendations

To mitigate elite-driven underdevelopment in Nigeria and foster a more equitable political and economic environment, several actionable strategies are necessary:

1. **Strengthening Institutions of Accountability:** Effective anti-corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) must be empowered to operate independently and transparently. A focus on prosecuting corruption across political divides—rather than selectively targeting opposition figures would help to restore public trust in governance. Moreover, the judicial system must be reformed to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their political affiliation, are held accountable for corruption and other forms of malfeasance.
2. **Electoral and Political Reform:** Political godfatherism and the manipulation of electoral processes have

been significant barriers to good governance and the emergence of competent leaders in Nigeria. To combat this, electoral reforms that ensure free, fair, and transparent elections are essential. Strengthening the independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and promoting greater public participation in the electoral process will help reduce the influence of godfathers and ensure that merit-based candidates are elected to office.

3. **Decentralization of Power and Resource Distribution:** The unequal distribution of resources has exacerbated regional disparities, particularly in the Niger Delta. A more equitable distribution of Nigeria's oil wealth and other resources is needed to foster development in neglected regions. This can be achieved through decentralization policies that give more power and autonomy to state and local governments, allowing for more localized decision-making.
4. **Promoting Transparency and Civic Engagement:** Civil society organizations (CSOs) have proven to be effective in holding elites accountable. Supporting and protecting the role of CSOs is crucial for strengthening transparency and promoting good governance. Platforms that encourage public participation in decision-making processes, such as town hall meetings and digital platforms for civic engagement, can help reduce the gap between elites and the general population.
5. **Institutionalizing Meritocracy and Political Inclusion:** To prevent the domination of political elites, Nigeria needs a political culture that prioritizes merit over loyalty or patronage. Institutional reforms that focus on competitive and transparent recruitment processes in government offices, as well as mechanisms to ensure that

underrepresented groups (especially women, youth, and ethnic minorities) are included in decision-making, can help mitigate elite dominance.

6. **Engaging International and Regional Partners:** International organizations, regional bodies, and development partners have a role to play in supporting Nigeria's fight against elite-driven underdevelopment. This can include providing technical assistance in areas such as anti-corruption initiatives, electoral reforms, and infrastructure development.

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