



Historical perspectives on Nigeria's Democracy, 25 years after

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Abstract

Original Research Article

After a long period of military dictatorship, Nigeria transitioned into civil rule in 1999. The transition stands among most consequential political experiments in contemporary African history. This study interrogates the historical paths, institutional transformations, contradictions as well as enduring challenges that have confronted Nigeria's democratic evolution. Adopting historical-analytical method, the paper situates Nigeria's Fourth Republic within the broader continuum of colonial political engineering, constitutional instability, prolonged military authoritarianism and the subsequent quest for democratic consolidation. The study argues that while Nigeria has sustained uninterrupted electoral democracy in the last two decades, the longest in its history, the quality of governance has been undermined by structural deficits such as electoral irregularities, elite domination of political space, weak institutions, ethno-regional contestations, corruption and persistent insecurity. Democratic endurance, as is demonstrated in this research, has not necessarily translated into democratic deepening. Instead, Nigeria's democracy reflects a paradox of procedural continuity alongside substantive fragility. By revisiting critical milestones including constitutional reforms, electoral transitions, judicial interventions, civil society activism and citizen participation, the paper evaluates whether Nigeria's democratic project has fulfilled the promises of accountability, inclusiveness, rule of law and socio-economic transformation. It further contends that the survival of democracy in Nigeria owes less to institutional maturity than to popular resistance against authoritarian relapse and increasing normative acceptance of democratic governance. The study concludes therefore, that Nigeria stands at a decisive historical path where democratic consolidation requires structural institutional reforms, political re-socialization, electoral integrity and inclusive development policies capable of transforming democracy from a mere political ritual into a functional instrument of national development.

Keywords: Democracy, Fourth Republic, Democratic Consolidation, Governance, Nigeria.

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Introduction

Nigeria's democratic journey can be viewed as one of the most advanced political experiments in post-colonial Africa. Since independence in 1960, the Nigerian state has oscillated between civilian governance and military

authoritarianism. This, as Claude Ake in his book, *Democracy and Development in Africa* succinctly puts it, is a reflection of unresolved tensions embedded within colonial state formation, ethnic pluralism and elite competition (Ake, 1996). Supporting Ake, Orji Boniface



Ifeanyi reveals that the newly formed republic was threatened by certain events that were multiple and varied in nature, leading to its eventual collapse (Orji, 2021). Available literature is replete with the fact, and as the agreement exists among scholars, that the euphoria that followed Nigeria's declaration of independence was short-lived as the new country was plunged into turmoil. Agreeing with this, Amstrong Matiu Adejo, in the introduction to his edited book adds that "in Nigeria that euphoria petered out a few years after independence" (Adejo, 2008). Interrogating the issues that triggered the turmoil, Undiyaundeye (2008) traces the seeds of the crises to 1945, when the Richards constitution created three regions reflecting the three major ethnic groups that have continued to use ethnic chauvinism to compete for dominant positions in both government, civil service among other platforms.

By 1959, the first shot of the crisis that greeted post-colonial Nigeria had happened, leading to the 1962 crisis when the Nigerian political elite experienced the Action Group (AG) turmoil that culminated in the failure of Obafemi Awolowo to get into the House of Representatives as Prime Minister (Undiyaundeye, 2008). The census crisis of 1962 also followed. It should be recalled that the 1952 to 1953 census figures had by 1962 increased by 71% for the Eastern Nigeria; 70% for Western Nigeria, and 30% for the North. These changes in population figures led to a verification exercise that was presided over by Waziri Ibrahim without even the supervision of the then Chief Census Officer, T. Warren. The numbers turned in had shown a rise in population figure for Northern Nigeria up to 80% while the figures for the East and West remained the same (Akpan & Akpan, 2019). In fact, it suffices to say that the 1962 census in Nigeria was a significant, highly controversial, and ultimately invalidated population count that intensified regional tensions shortly after independence.

As part of the factors that caused the turmoil that engulfed the Nigerian state within half a decade of independence, Terhemba Wuam writes that;

The anxiety and struggle for power and concerns for the distribution of

resources [also] brought about misunderstandings and strained working relationships along ethnic lines on a number of issues for which the nationalists experience had not prepared them as it were, the various regional governments and their representatives at the centre were stuck in objectives that were often... antagonistic to each other...(Wuam, 2008).

This, among other factors, some of which had been mentioned above conspired to weaken the political administration of the early post colonial Nigeria, leading to eventual collapse of the political administration as the military struck in a coup that was bloody and did not just sack the political leadership on 15 January, 1966, but also had some political leaders permanently put out of circulation. Since then, the country experienced intermittent efforts at the restoration of democratic rule and subsequent military intervention in government.

The transition to civil rule on 29 May, 1999 marked not merely a regime change but a historical rupture from 15 years of military dominance, and marked the start of the Fourth Republic. The inauguration of the Fourth Republic under President Olusegun Obasanjo symbolized a renewed national aspiration for constitutional governance, political accountability and socio-economic transformation (Sule, 2026). However, twenty-five years later, Nigeria presents a democratic contradiction. On one hand, uninterrupted elections and civilian rule suggest institutional progress. On the other hand, governance outcomes reveal persistent crises of legitimacy, inequality, corruption, insecurity and democratic disillusionment. To determine whether democratic endurance has translated into democratic consolidation, this study therefore interrogates Nigeria's democracy through the lenses of history.

Harnessing secondary data such as scholarly publications, policy reports, constitutional documents, and electoral records, this research adopts the **historical-analytical method**. The approach allows for critical interrogation of historical continuities and structural dynamics

that shape democratic practice in Nigeria. (Sklar, 2004).

Colonial Foundations and the Origins of Democratic Contradictions

A number of historical factors, such as the industrial capitalist economy development in far away Europe, as pointed out by Chuka Euka, exposed Nigeria as a prey and got the country plunged into British imperial rule. This no doubt, happened in the 18th century and lasted till 1 October, 1960. During this period, the peoples of Nigeria remained under the control of British sovereignty but got provoked by the factors such as obnoxious colonial policies, discriminatory attitudes against Nigerian merchants and bureaucrats, the frowning at colonial rule as the United Nations charter did, among other factors (Euka, 2007). As a result of this, Nigerian Nationalists began the agitation for self rule which was achieved in 1960.

Looking at the elusive history of Nigeria, it is known that the ethnic nationalities that constituted the independent Nigeria, prior to the coming of the Europeans, saw themselves as different peoples and interacted commercially and otherwise, going their separate ways at the end. This is informed by the fact that they had different cultures and well established political systems of administration with which they governed themselves independent of one another. Godspower A. Uduigwomen, supports this, writes that:

Before the coming of the British, Nigeria was made up of many towns, villages, chiefdoms, kingdoms, ethnic groups, and city-states. The northern part of the country was home to several powerful Hausa city-states...[that] had well established systems and they engaged in commerce, particularly trade...(Uduigwomen, 2024).

In the aspect of his book entitled “British Conquest of Nigeria”, Ikenna Ukpabi Unya identified two distinct phases on which the

British conquest of Nigeria was accomplished. According to him, the first phase happened between 1851 and 1900, beginning with the conquest of Lagos in 1851 after which the British moved inward into the interior, capturing other parts of Yorubaland. The 1914 amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates, creating a single colony called Nigeria marked the second phase of the British conquest of Nigeria. Before this time, the charter of the Royal Niger Company had been withdrawn in 1899 and brought the companies dominance over the north (Unya, 2023). With the 1914 amalgamation, as observed by David Olayinka Ajayi, Nigeria’s democratic evolution began within the framework of British colonial administration as the diverse ethnic nationalities got united into a single political entity for the primary purpose of administrative convenience. Colonial rule introduced Western political institutions such as legislative councils, electoral representation and constitutional governance, though participation remained highly restricted (Ajayi, 2022). The Clifford Constitution of 1922 was significant it introduced elective representation in Lagos and Calabar. Despite its setbacks, the Clifford Constitution seem to have stimulated political awareness and triggered the formation of early nationalist movements. The mobilization of Nigerians against colonialism by Herbert Macaulay, no doubt, laid the intellectual and organizational foundations of democratic participation.

The constitutional reforms that followed, such as the Richards Constitution of 1946, Macpherson Constitution of 1951 and Lyttleton Constitution of 1954, gradually expanded political participation and federal arrangements. This, as James Smoot Coleman averred, prepared Nigeria for self-government (Coleman, 1958). Nigeria’s democratic path cannot be understood outside its colonial origins. British colonial administration constructed Nigeria primarily as an administrative convenience rather than a coherent political community.

Mahmood Mamdani reveals that colonial governance introduced limited electoral institutions. At the same time, colonial agents entrenched indirect rule, regional inequalities

and elite brokerage politics. The emergent political class inherited a state designed for control rather than democratic participation (Mamdani, 2018). Consequently, post-independence democracy inherited structural tensions between federalism, ethnicity and political competition.

Post-Independence Democracy and Military Intervention, 1960-1999.

Nigeria's First Republic (1960-1966) collapsed under electoral manipulation, regional rivalry and political violence. C.C. Agbodiye confirmed this when he wrote that the history of colonial and post-colonial Nigeria is replete with perennial crises arising from lack of confidence and acrimonious bickering, caused by mutual distrust, socio-political disunity, tribalism and economic disparity among the ethnic nationalities. These issues continued unabated and widen the lines of polarization among Nigeria's diverse populations. This development made the country's body-polity prone to struggles and clashes of interests and personalities and made manifest in the Action Group crisis mentioned earlier (Agbodiye, 2006).

Before 1960 when Nigeria gained independence, uneasy calm had pervaded the country. This uneasy calm intensified during the 1959 elections with the rift that occurred between the Northern Peoples Congress leader, Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, and the Action Group leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. In 1962, the Nigeria's political crisis took a new dimension. The crisis began with then leader of the Action Group, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the then Premier of the Western region, S.I. Akintola as Awolowo labelled Akintola's reign a maladministration, and also accused him of indulging in anti-party activities to favour the Northern People's Congress (Yahaya, 2018). As a result, the Action Group convened a meeting in Ibadan on 20 May, 1962. During this meeting that was constituted by the Western and Mid-Western executive of the party, resolved that the Premier, Akintola and asked him to vacate the positions of Premier and Deputy leader of the

party which Akintola declined. However, the Western Region Governor, Sir Adesoji Aderemi went on and relieved Akintola of his job as Premier of Western Region citing decline in popularity among the members of the Western House of Assembly, and sworn in Alhaji Daude Adegbenro as Premier of Western Nigeria (Ojo, 2016). Akintola continued to resist his alleged removal, insisting that his removal can only come from majority members of the Western House of Assembly. The state of emergency was enforced by the 3rd Battalion of the Nigerian Army to ensure that the Governor and the Premier vacated.

In a concerted effort to remove Akintola from the office of Premier, the Western House of Assembly, on 25 May, 1962 convened and started a debate on a vote of no confidence on Akintola, but a serious commotion erupted on the floor of the regional parliament and subsequently led to the declaration of state of emergency in the Western Region after Akintola was dismissed from the party. Following the declaration of state of emergency in the region, Akintola's faction of the Action Group with the support of the National Council for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the West, formed another party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). Following this development, Akintola was re-instated as Premier of the Western Region (Ojo, 2016). In summary, Awolowo was subsequently arrested and charged with treasonable felony and was convicted for ten years. Moving further to destabilize the Western region, the Federal Government dominated by the NPC went on and created the Mid-West out of the Western Region. The events described are an accurate summary of the 1962 Action Group crisis in the Western Region of Nigeria, which significantly accelerated the instability of the First Republic.

While the country was still grappling with 1962-63 Action Group and the census crises, the year 1965 saw another crisis arising from the Western Region election during which a lot of irregularities were recorded just as was the case with the federal elections that took place the previous year. As recorded by Agbodiye (2006), the federal election result showed that NNA had won 71 seats as against UPGA that was said to

had won 17 seats, a result that remained contested at that time as protests engulfed the Western region. Amidst this turbulent situation, the Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa remained silent to the dismay of many Nigerians.

The removal of Prof. Eni Njoku as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos in 1965 is another symbolic crises that exposed the deepening political instability that eventually culminated in the collapse of Nigeria's First Republic in 1966. Though seemingly an academic dispute, the episode reflected the dangerous intrusion of partisan politics into national institutions and intensified regional distrust within the federation.

Prof. Njoku, an accomplished academic of Igbo origin, was appointed Vice-Chancellor at a time when Nigeria's fragile federal democracy was already strained by ethnic rivalry, electoral violence and intense competition among regional political elites. His removal by the Federal Government, dominated by northern political leadership under Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, was widely perceived, especially in the Eastern Region as politically motivated rather than administratively justified.

It was alleged, as captured by C.C. Agbodike that the refusal by the Balewa led Federal Government to renew Njoku's appointment was among the agreements reached by the Akintola led NNDP with NPC. It is known that the NNDP and the NPC formed the NNA alliance that if the NNA won the 1964-65 federal elections, the Vice Chancellors of the Universities of Lagos and Ibadan, who at that time, were Igbo men, would be changed and replaced by NNDP nominees. When the NNA won, the NNDP set out immediately to implement this proposal. The Provisional Council that was dominated by Yoruba and chaired by a Yoruba man refused to renew Prof. Eni Njoku's appointment whose tenure was due to expire on 31 May, 1965, despite the University Senate's recommendation for a renewal of Njoku's appointment, and replaced him with Dr. Saburi Biobaku, a Yoruba scholar. (Agbodike, 2006). With this development, crisis erupted in the university as Students protested, public intellectuals

condemned the action, and regional newspapers framed the event as evidence of growing political exclusion (Sklar, 2004) but the federal government remained unperturbed. The removal of Prof. Njoku therefore became more than an administrative change; it symbolized the erosion of federal fairness and meritocracy.

A similar incident had started to rear its head in the University of Ibadan where Prof. Kenneth Dike, another Igbo man, was the Vice Chancellor. But Dike simply resigned and left the University shortly after. These incidents demonstrated how political interference had penetrated institutions that ought to have remained neutral spaces of national integration, as the universities were expected to foster unity after the 1914 amalgamation and independence.

According to Dudley (1982), the politicization of public appointments during the First Republic deepened mistrust among Nigeria's regions and weakened citizens' confidence in democratic governance, as many Eastern Nigerian leaders interpreted the decision as an ethnic marginalization of Igbo professionals within federal institutions.

Combined with the Western Region crisis, disputed elections of 1964-1965, and widespread political violence among other things, the UNILAG crisis also reinforced ethnic polarization, adding impetus to the controversies that contributed to the atmosphere of instability that justified military intervention in January 1966. This no doubt, justifies Finer and Huntington's argument as cited by Udeagbala, Uhere & Etuk (2024), that the military need right socio-political system in disarray to take over political administration.

The military coup of January 1966 ushered in decades of military dominance interrupted only briefly by civilian interludes. Military regimes justified intervention as corrective governance yet paradoxically weakened democratic culture by centralizing power, suppressing civil liberties and undermining institutional autonomy (Joseph, 1991). By the 1990s, pro-democracy movements, labour unions, student activism, and civil society resistance intensified demands for democratic restoration following the annulment

of the June 12, 1993 presidential election widely believed to have been won by Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola.

The Fourth Republic and Democratic Transition (1999–Present)

The Fourth Republic represents Nigeria's longest democratic era. Regular elections have occurred in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023, indicating procedural democratic stability. The Fourth Republic no doubt, has lasted for almost 28 years, the same duration of military rule in Nigeria.

The history of Nigeria recorded one of the most controversial political experiences when General Sani Abacha initiated a transition programme to return Nigeria to civil rule. This happened after the political crisis that followed the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, and was officially designed to return Nigeria to civilian rule in 1998 but was widely criticized as a calculated strategy for self-succession (Idachaba, 2001).

After the annulment of the 12 June, 1993 elections that was widely considered the most free, fair in Nigeria's political history, and won by MKO Abiola, Ernest Shonekan was inaugurate as Head of the interim government from whom Abacha seized power, dissolving democratic institutions, banned political activities and ruled through decrees (Rotimi & Ihonvbere, 1994). Coming under intense domestic and international pressure for democratization, the Abacha's regime, in 1995 announced a carefully structured transition timetable aimed at inauguration of civilian President on 1 October, 1998.

To achieve his self-succession dream, Abacha convened a Constitutional Conference to draft a new political framework for Nigeria. Delegates were partly elected and partly appointed by him to ensure military influence over the constitutional outcomes. Abacha also allowed the existence of five political parties. But funny enough, the five political parties all endorsed the Abacha Presidential candidacy thereby generating public outcry. When everything

appeared set for the self-succession, the unimaginable happened as Abacha died suddenly on 8 June, 1998; a development that made way for Abdulsalami Abubaka to become Head of State.

Abdulsalami Abubakar, immediately dismantled the existing transition arrangement put in place by the Late Abacha and initiated a new, credible democratization process that would lead to the Fourth Republic in May 1999. To actualize a peaceful transition, the power block of Northern Nigeria resolved that the apex office in Nigeria should return to the West as compensation for the annulled 12 June election. But the North took care choosing a candidate that will guarantee protection of Northern interest. A former Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo who was in prison at that time, was found to fit in that category for sundry reasons. As such, Obasanjo was brought out of prison to become president even when he was not prepared for such assignment. But was it right for Nigeria to transition from military dictatorship to civilian administration have a retired General as the civilian president? Whether such transitions arrangement was right or wrong, for obvious reasons, Nigerians did not care to know. Matthew Hassan Kukah has summarized the situation saying that there was a general feeling of resentment among Nigerians following the annulment of the 12 June, 1993 elections, the impact of the Structural Adjustment Programme brought by the Babngida regime and the banning of political associations among other things. (Kukah, 2009). These factors had taken their toll on Nigerians with a general feeling of bitterness filling the air. As such, the idea of Obasanjo, a retired General and an African statesman with his pro-democracy antecedent and rejection of the South African apartheid regime, looked very attractive.

As opined by Kukah (2009), the Army arrangement that brought Obasanjo to power used the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) as Noah's ark of sorts, through which men and women with diverse convictions ferried, and at the Jos convention handed over the party's flag to Obasanjo culminating in his emergence as President of Nigeria, marking the beginning of

the Fourth Republic. It is important to note that even the PDP, despite capturing did not have a clear ideology to give the country a direction. This has been made manifest in the movement of men and women from the party to other parties in a manner unprecedented of an ideal party ideology. Subsequently, the incessant removal of the party's chairman and National Assembly officials under Obasanjo was a prove that the democratic or civil rule mantra was rather a lip service as the General in the person of Obasanjo manifested in his bid to consolidate power, lending credence to the saying that 'you can take a man from the Military but you cannot take Military from him'.

Throughout the Obasanjo's first tenure, opposition parties did not showed no seriousness to nestle power from him and he won his second term election which kept him in office till 2007 when Late Umaru Musa Yaradua in a joint ticket with Ebele Goodluck Jonathan came into office as President and Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. On assumption of office, Yaradua agreed that the process that brought him to power was marred by electoral irregularity and set out to reform the political institutions and process. As Terhemba Wuam, Buomo Ezonbi and Emmanuel Changwak Jona highlight that although brief, Yaradua's administration (2007-2010), represented a deliberate attempt to restore legitimacy, constitutionalism and ethical governance after years of electoral controversy and democratic uncertainty. His leadership emphasized rule of law, electoral reform, institutional strengthening, and political reconciliation. A general evaluation of the Yaradua reveals a reluctant but principled democrat whose leadership deepened Nigeria's democratic culture through moderation rather than dramatic political activism.

Emerging from a constitutional crisis following the illness and death of President Umaru Musa Yaradua, Goodluck Jonathan succeeded his predecessor in 2010, first as Acting President and later became substantive. His regime became associated with electoral reforms, expansion of civil liberties, and the historic institutionalization of democratic transfer of power in Nigeria. Jonathan assumed office in February 2010 under

the Doctrine of Necessity adopted by the National Assembly. His emergence demonstrated the growing resilience of Nigeria's constitutional order, as political succession occurred without military intervention. Jonathan's regime is viewed as a transition from procedural democracy toward democratic consolidation. His administration strengthened democratic norms not through authoritarian control but through institutional tolerance and respect for electoral outcomes.

Despite notable democratic advances during President Goodluck Jonathan's administration (2010-2015), Nigeria's democratization process also experienced significant setbacks. These challenges revealed structural weaknesses within Nigeria's political institutions and highlighted the complexity of democratic consolidation in a post-authoritarian state. The Jonathan administration simultaneously advanced and challenged Nigeria's democratization process. While it institutionalized electoral credibility and peaceful power transfer, democratic setbacks emerged through insecurity, corruption allegations, institutional weaknesses and socio-economic pressures. These contradictions demonstrate that democratization is not a linear process but a continuous struggle between institutional progress and structural limitations within Nigeria's evolving political system. The peaceful transition strengthened public confidence in civilian supremacy and democratic continuity.

The 2015 general election occupies a historic position in Nigeria's democratic trend as an incumbent president, for the first time since the country's independence, was defeated through the ballot box. This development signaled a major democratic breakthrough. The emergence of Muhammadu Buhari over incumbent Goodluck Jonathan demonstrated the growing maturity of Nigeria's electoral culture and reinforced public confidence in democratic procedures.

Jonathan's peaceful concession remains widely regarded as a defining democratic moment that prevented post-electoral violence and strengthened constitutional governance (Omotola, 2017). The role played by the

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), particularly through technological innovations such as the Permanent Voter Card (PVC) and Smart Card Reader, enhanced electoral credibility and reduced large-scale manipulation previously associated with Nigerian elections (Jega, 2015). However, while the transition symbolized democratic consolidation, it also raised expectations for governance reforms, anti-corruption measures, economic recovery and national security stabilization.

The Buhari administration emerged within a context of severe national challenges, including insurgency in the North-East, economic recession, corruption scandals and declining oil revenues. The government prioritized anti-corruption campaigns and military offensives against insurgency groups such as Boko Haram. While these policies strengthened executive authority, critics argued that democratic freedoms occasionally faced constraints through selective law enforcement and restrictions on civil protests (Agbaje & Adejumobi, 2020).

Nigeria experienced its first economic recession in decades in 2016, followed by another economic contraction during the COVID-19 pandemic. These economic pressures exposed structural weaknesses in governance and intensified citizen dissatisfaction with democratic dividends (Suberu, 2019). Despite these challenges, electoral continuity remained intact. The 2019 general elections reaffirmed democratic endurance, although concerns persisted regarding voter suppression, militarization of elections and declining voter turnout. It was observed that Nigerian democracy during this period survived not because institutions were fully consolidated but because democratic norms had become politically indispensable (Diamond, 2019).

A defining democratic development between 2015 and 2026 was the rise of youth-driven civic activism. The #EndSARS protests of 2020 represented one of the most significant citizen mobilizations in Nigeria's democratic history. Youths demanded police reform, accountability and respect for human rights following allegations of abuses by the Special Anti-

Robbery Squad (SARS). The protests revealed an evolving democratic consciousness where citizens increasingly viewed democracy not merely as periodic elections but as participatory governance grounded in justice and dignity (Oloruntoba & Falola, 2022). Although the protests ended amid controversy and state repression, they reshaped political discourse by empowering civil society, digital activism and political engagement among younger Nigerians.

The 2023 elections marked another transformative moment characterized by intense political competition, technological experimentation and heightened public expectations. The emergence of Bola Ahmed Tinubu as president reflected shifting political alliances and the persistence of party dominance under Nigeria's multiparty system. Equally significant was the unprecedented youth participation stimulated by reformist political movements and the candidacy of opposition figures such as Peter Gregory Obi, whose campaign mobilized urban voters, professionals and first-time participants. Analysts argue that the election demonstrated both democratic expansion and institutional limitations, particularly controversies surrounding electronic transmission of results and public trust in electoral transparency (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2024). The election underscored a paradox. Nigeria's democracy continues to deepen socially even when institutional credibility faces skepticism.

From 2023 onward, Nigeria's democracy entered a period defined by economic restructuring and governance reforms. Policy decisions including fuel subsidy removal and currency reforms triggered public debate about democratic accountability and social justice. While advocates described these policies as necessary structural adjustments, critics argued that democratic legitimacy depends on balancing economic reform with social protection.

Democracy during this period increasingly reflected negotiation between state authority and citizen expectations. The National Assembly, judiciary, media institutions and civil society

organizations continued to serve as arenas for democratic contestation. Political pluralism remained vibrant, yet governance outcomes highlighted enduring structural problems such as corruption, insecurity, unemployment and regional inequality.

By 2026, Nigeria's democracy can best be described as resilient but unfinished. Elections have become institutionalized, military intervention has receded from political imagination and democratic norms now constitute the accepted framework of political legitimacy. Nevertheless, democratic consolidation remains incomplete due to weak institutions, elite dominance and limited delivery of socio-economic welfare.

Conclusion

Nigeria's democratic journey, twenty-six years after the inauguration of the Fourth Republic, represents both a remarkable historical achievement and a profound political paradox. The endurance of uninterrupted civilian rule since 1999 has undoubtedly altered Nigeria's political pathway, breaking the cycle of recurrent military interruptions that defined much of the post-independence era. Democracy has survived where earlier republics collapsed. Electoral transitions have become institutionalized, constitutional governance has gained normative legitimacy, and popular resistance against authoritarian relapse has strengthened democratic consciousness among citizens.

Yet, historical interrogation reveals that democratic survival has not automatically translated into democratic consolidation. The Nigerian state continues to operate within structural contradictions inherited from colonial political engineering, compounded by post-independence elite rivalry and prolonged military authoritarianism. Institutions remain vulnerable to political capture; elections frequently struggle with credibility deficits; governance outcomes have not sufficiently addressed socio-economic inequality, insecurity, unemployment and declining public trust. Consequently, Nigeria's democracy reflects

procedural continuity without corresponding substantive transformation.

The study therefore establishes that Nigeria stands at a decisive historical crossroads. The next phase of democratic development must transcend electoral ritualism and focus on institutional integrity, civic culture and inclusive governance. Democratic consolidation will depend not merely on constitutional existence but on the capacity of political institutions to deliver justice, accountability, participation and human development. The historical lessons examined—from colonial state formation through the crises of the First Republic and the authoritarian interruptions of military rule—demonstrate that democracy collapses when institutions are weak, when citizenship is subordinated to ethnicity and when governance loses moral legitimacy.

Nigeria's democratic future thus requires deliberate reconstruction of political values, institutional reform, and socio-economic inclusion capable of transforming democracy into a lived reality rather than a periodic electoral exercise.

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