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# Democratic Backsliding in Nigeria: A Comparative Assessment of Institutional Decline in West Africa

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## Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of democratic backsliding in Nigeria through an institutional lens, comparing its trajectory with those of selected West African peers. We begin by surveying the literature on democratic erosion and institutional decay in Africa, noting that formal democratic rules often mask autocratic practices. Theoretical perspectives such as Democratic Consolidation Theory and Institutional Theory are applied to explain Nigeria's institutional erosion. Using a qualitative comparative case study approach, we analyze Nigeria's recent decline focusing on the judiciary, electoral processes, and executive-legislative relations drawing on empirical data from election observer reports and scholarly studies. We then contrast these findings with developments in Ghana, Senegal, and Mali to identify regional patterns. The analysis reveals that while Ghana's democracy remains relatively robust, both Senegal and Mali have experienced acute reversals, highlighting a regional trend of weakening checks and rising authoritarianism. We discuss the implications for governance and security in West Africa, noting that institutional decay undermines public trust and can exacerbate conflict. The article concludes with policy recommendations strengthening judicial independence, reforming electoral bodies, protecting civil liberties, and bolstering regional democratic norms to promote resilience against backsliding. These recommendations aim to guide reformers in sustaining democratic governance in Nigeria and the region.

## Key Words

Democratic backsliding, West Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Mali

## 1. Introduction

The military rule in Nigeria ended in 1999, ushering in a multiparty democracy that initially offered hope for stable civilian governance. Indeed, early signs of progress were evident in the emergence of a robust civil society and increasingly competitive electoral processes. However, over the past few years, there have been growing indications of democratic erosion. Key institutions have shown signs of weakening: the judiciary has become increasingly politicized, elections have grown more contentious, and executives at various levels have expanded their powers in ways that sometimes bypass established legal norms (Omenma et al., 2023). Collectively, these developments reflect what scholars describe as *democratic backsliding* a regression within liberal democracies even when constitutional structures appear to remain intact.

Democratic backsliding has also emerged as a pressing concern across West Africa, a region once regarded as hosting some of the continent's most vibrant democracies. Recent literature highlights a broader *democratic recession* in the region, as previously stable states now exhibit

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creeping authoritarian tendencies (International IDEA, 2019). Against this backdrop, this paper provides a detailed analysis of Nigeria's democratic decline. It seeks to address the central question: What is the nature of the deterioration in Nigeria's democratic institutions in recent years, and how does this trajectory compare with trends in other West African states?

The article is structured as follows: a review of the literature on democratic backsliding in Africa; an exploration of the theoretical framework on institutional decay; a methodology section; an in-depth case study of Nigeria; a comparative analysis involving Ghana, Senegal, and Mali; and a discussion of implications with accompanying policy recommendations. The study draws on empirical evidence from election observation missions, civil society reports, and academic literature.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Conceptual Foundations of Democracy**

Democracy is widely conceptualized as a political system grounded in competitive elections, accountability, the rule of law, and respect for civil liberties. Classical scholars such as Coglianese (1990) and Diamond (1999) emphasize that democratic systems require not only periodic elections but meaningful competition among political actors and robust institutional checks capable of constraining arbitrary authority. Theories of democratic consolidation further stress that democracy becomes stable only when its norms and procedures are internalized by political elites and citizens alike when, in the words of Schedler (2001), it becomes "the only game in town." These foundational principles set the stage for examining how and why democracies may later experience regression or erosion.

### **2.2. Democracy Backsliding: An Explanation**

However, despite these foundational ideals, a growing number of democracies both mature and emerging have exhibited symptoms of "democratic backsliding" or deconsolidation. This phenomenon involves the gradual weakening of core democratic attributes even while formal electoral processes remain intact. Scholars such as Foa and Mounk (2017) note that backsliding typically manifests through declining civil liberties, compromised judicial independence, and weakened institutional checks on executive authority. As these foundational safeguards erode, regimes often transition into hybrid political systems that retain the façade of democracy while adopting illiberal or authoritarian practices. Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that such competitive-authoritarian regimes employ tactics such as electoral manipulation, suppression of dissent, and executive overreach strategies that allow incumbents to maintain power without overtly abandoning democratic institutions.

### **2.3. Regional Trends: Democratic Backsliding in West Africa**

Building on the broader conceptual discussion, recent scholarship highlights a pronounced democratic recession within the West African region. Countries once regarded as success stories of democratization are now grappling with institutional decay, governance crises, and rising authoritarian tendencies. Gyimah-Boadi (2021) observes that declining public trust in political institutions, compounded by insecurity and endemic corruption, has further destabilized democratic governance across the region. Freedom House (2025) similarly documents a steady deterioration in civil liberties and rule of law, including in historically strong democracies such as Ghana and Senegal. More recent analyses, including Ogundare (2025), attribute these trends to the weakening of checks and balances and the growing tendency of ruling elites to circumvent or undermine constitutional constraints. These regional patterns serve as an important backdrop for understanding country-specific cases such as Nigeria.

#### **2.4. Democratic Backsliding in Nigeria**

Nigeria exemplifies many of the challenges identified within the regional context and appears to follow a similar trajectory of democratic regression. The scholarly literature consistently highlights recurring electoral malpractice and entrenched state capture, characterized by vote-buying, ballot snatching, and systematic manipulation of election results. Onapajo and Uzodike (2014) argue that the persistent weakness of Nigeria's judiciary enables these practices, as the culture of impunity within the legal system encourages political actors to violate electoral norms without fear of consequences. Further, Adebani and Obadare (2010) and Kobo (2012) document the growing centralization of power in the executive branch, where presidents increasingly dominate the legislature and judiciary through expansive patronage networks. More recent contributors, such as Jatau and Köprülü (2024) and Elijah et al. (2025), describe Nigeria's Fourth Republic as a competitive-authoritarian regime democratic in form but substantively weakened by the erosion of institutional checks and balances.

#### **2.5. Drivers of Democratic Backsliding in Africa and Nigeria**

Across the African continent, and particularly in Nigeria, scholars identify a set of interrelated drivers that fuel ongoing democratic decline:

1. Weak institutionalization of democratic norms
2. Executive aggrandizement and overconcentration of power
3. Endemic corruption and entrenched patronage networks
4. Socio-economic inequalities and governance failures that undermine citizen trust

Understanding these drivers is crucial for the analytical direction of this study. They provide the conceptual basis for the deeper assessment undertaken in subsequent sections, which integrates scholarly insights with contemporary empirical evidence including election observation reports and civil society analyses to evaluate Nigeria's current democratic trajectory within the broader African context.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

We frame Nigeria's institutional erosion using two complementary theories. Democratic Consolidation Theory posits that stable democracy requires not only elections but also entrenched institutions: an impartial judiciary, credible electoral bodies, a vigilant civil society, and civilian control of the military. Erosion in any of these pillars risks tipping the system toward authoritarian drift. For example, Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that democratic norms and values must be widely internalized by elites and citizens; otherwise, democracy remains superficial. Nigeria's experience where formal rules exist but are often flouted illustrates such a deficit of consolidation.

Institutional Theory from political science and sociology complements this view by emphasizing how formal laws and informal norms guide actor behavior (Bhasin, 2017). Strong institutions (e.g., independent courts, professional bureaucracy) stabilize expectations and discipline elites. When institutions weaken (through politicized appointments or fiscal capture), they lose their constraining power. Applied to Nigeria, institutional theory helps explain how, for instance, a judiciary subjected to executive influence will fail to adjudicate electoral disputes impartially (Elegu & Saleh, 2024). Likewise, when electoral laws or administrative procedures are vague or improperly applied, they create opportunities for manipulation (Karásková et al., 2023). In short, institutionalist perspectives highlight that the processes and rules of Nigerian politics

shape the course of backsliding: where norms erode, executives and dominant parties can override constraints, leading to de facto autocracy even under a democratic veneer.

We also invoke the concept of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way 2010) as an interpretive frame. This model describes regimes where incumbents routinely leverage state resources to tilt the playing field, while permitting limited opposition activity. Evidence from Nigeria such as executive interference in elections and media repression fits this pattern. Thus, the theoretical framework combines consolidation theory and institutionalism to explain Nigeria's slide: democratically instituted structures are being hollowed out through erosion of rule-based conduct and growing executive dominance.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study uses a comparative qualitative approach. The case study of Nigeria is informed by an extensive review of secondary data: peer-reviewed articles, think-tank reports, election observation mission findings, and civil society documentation. Key data sources include the Freedom in the World report (Freedom House), Global State of Democracy indices (International IDEA, 2025; Freedom House, 2024b), and mission reports from organizations like the European Union (EU) Election Observation Mission. We also analyze primary materials (electoral commission reports, constitutional texts) where available. Empirical evidence on specific events (2023 general elections, judicial controversies, protests) is drawn from media reports and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) releases to ground the analysis in observed facts.

For the comparative analysis, we selected Ghana, Senegal, and Mali to represent different trajectories in West Africa: Ghana as a relatively resilient democracy, Senegal as a historically stable democracy facing new challenges, and Mali as a case of authoritarian reversal (Boafo-Arthur, 2008; Hvattum, 2014). We compare institutional indicators (judicial independence, election quality, executive powers) across these countries using available survey data and reports. The analysis identifies patterns and contrasts: for example, Freedom House scores or index trends, the legal framework for elections, and documented incidents of rights violations. Qualitative comparisons rely on scholarly studies of each country's recent experience, such as court cases in Ghana, Sall's tenure in Senegal, and post-coup developments in Mali (Freedom House, 2025b)

#### **5. Results: Case Study of Nigeria**

##### **5.1. Electoral Institutions and Practices**

Despite holding regular elections, Nigeria's democratic quality has deteriorated. Observers report that recent elections were marred by widespread irregularities. For instance, Freedom House notes that the February 2023 presidential and legislative elections "were marred by significant irregularities, including violence at a number of polling locations" (Freedom House, 2024a; Seriki et al., 2023). Voter turnout was only 27% an all-time low reflecting low public trust in the process. International monitors (EU Electoral Observation mission) likewise found that "shortcomings in law and electoral administration hindered the conduct of well-run and inclusive elections and damaged trust in INEC" (Freedom House, 2024a). Reported malpractices include ballot box snatching, voter intimidation, vote-buying, and falsification of results (Abdu-Raheem & Bamgbade 2020; Mene 2024). These abuses not only compromise outcomes but also feed a sense of illegitimacy: one study concludes that such irregularities "undermine the legitimacy of the entire democratic system" and discourage future participation.

Key weaknesses in the electoral framework have been identified: the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) suffers from underfunding and occasional politicization. EU observers recommended, for example, that future reforms "remove ambiguities in the law" and

ensure “real-time publication of and access to election result (Election Observation and Democracy Support, 2018). Domestic experts echo this, calling for the overhauled electoral law to be implemented rigorously and for INEC to be fully independent. Until such reforms are enacted, each election cycle tends to reveal the same flaws, reinforcing public cynicism about democratic consolidation (Itodo, 2024; Udeala, n.d).

## 5.2. Judiciary and Rule of Law

Historically, Nigeria’s judiciary has played an activist role in defending rights. However, recent observers warn that the judiciary’s independence and effectiveness are in decline. Joshua (2018) laments that “many Nigerians feel like the judiciary has lost its edge, its independence,” citing “allegations of executive interference” and even the “gifting of houses and cars to judges”. Empirical studies corroborate this view: the structure of the judiciary has been linked to electoral fraud, as weak courts cannot adequately adjudicate disputes (Omenma et al., 2017). For example, thousands of election petitions were filed in 2023 challenging results, but courts generally upheld the status quo either citing lack of evidence or being unable to hear all cases swiftly (Itodo, 2023). There is concern that pressure on judges has influenced these rulings; civil society advocates describe the judiciary’s tacit complicity with the executive as a severe blow to checks and balances.

Political interference has intensified post-2023. In one high-profile incident, the presidency aggressively pursued a judicial removal proceeding against the Chief Justice of Nigeria over alleged misconduct, culminating in a forced suspension. Legal experts warned that the process “raised concerns about judicial independence and due process,” since the grounds were vague and proceedings rushed (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). Such episode’s signal that even judicial tenure previously seen as secure is now vulnerable to executive whims. This erosion of the rule of law emboldens power grabs; as Obasun (2025) note, Nigeria is morphing into a hybrid regime, “where elections take place, but fundamental democratic norms are hollowed out”.

## 5.3. Executive-Legislative Dynamics

The Nigerian president and governors wield substantial levers that enable them to dominate other branches of government. Constitutionally, the executive controls extensive patronage resources, including oil revenues and local government funds, which are often used to secure legislative loyalty. In practice, “both the legislature and judiciary are frequently subordinated to executive interests” (Obasun, 2025). This dynamic is evident in the National Assembly’s frequent deference: key bills or investigations that clash with presidential priorities are often delayed or obstructed. For example, in early 2023, President Tinubu’s decision to withdraw fuel subsidies carried out with minimal legislative oversight triggered widespread protests (Office of the President of Nigeria, 2025; Phillip, 2025). This episode underscores how executive action can circumvent democratic deliberation when expedient.

At the subnational level, the 2025 Rivers State crisis illustrates the risks of executive overreach. Federal authorities invoked a state of emergency to remove the elected governor and install a military appointee (BBC News, 2025). Civil society observers condemned this move as “nothing short of a Presidential Coup,” while Yiaga Africa warned that such interventions set “a dangerous precedent for democracy” and that “presidential overreach can be addictive” (Otumbere Weldone, 2025). Notably, the National Assembly largely acquiesced, later approving constitutional amendments that retroactively legitimized the takeover (Abdu, 2025).

Legal scholars argue that this case exemplifies the substitution of informal power consolidation for formal constitutional rules, highlighting a troubling erosion in the separation of

powers. This observation aligns with earlier analyses by Ojibara (2017) and Ojukwu et al. (2020), who warn that unchecked executive influence can accelerate democratic backsliding.

#### 5.4. Civil Society and Media

The space for opposition, media, and civil society in Nigeria has constricted. During nationwide protests in 2020–2021 (#EndSARS), security forces used disproportionate force, including live ammunition, to suppress demonstrators (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2021). Independent journalists and activists report frequent harassment or arbitrary arrests when covering politically sensitive issues. In recent years, at least one prominent newspaper was shut down after publishing a damaging report on a governor's assets. These trends are consistent with Obasun (2025) finding that civic and press freedoms have steadily eroded under successive administrations. The result is a chilling environment: fear of reprisal leads many civil society actors to self-censor or avoid direct confrontation with power. Both domestic surveys and expert observations confirm Nigeria's decline in media freedom ratings in recent years, reflecting these pressures (Aluko & Oloyede, 2025)

Taken together, the evidence paints a picture of Nigeria's institutions steadily weakening. A bullet-point summary of Nigeria's key institutional declines highlights the main issues:

1. Judicial independence: Growing executive interference and corruption scandals have "led people wondering where the judiciary is we once trusted?" (Bhatnagar, 2025).
2. Electoral integrity: Elections are routinely tainted by violence, vote-buying, and procedural failures, with only 27% turnout in 2023 (Anaele, 2025).
3. Executive aggrandizement: The presidency has overridden governors and expanded security powers, often without legislative checks (Obasun, 2025).
4. Legislative deference: Parliament often aligns with the executive, undermining its intended oversight role (Epia, 2025).
5. Civil liberties: Protesters, journalists, and opposition figures face repression, shrinking democratic space (Aluko & Oloyede, 2025).

#### 5.5. Comparative Analysis

Comparing Nigeria to selected West African peers reveals both common patterns and diverging outcomes. We examine Ghana, Senegal, and Mali to highlight regional similarities in backsliding trends, as well as notable contrasts.

##### 5.5.1. Ghana

Widely regarded as a democratic success in the region, Ghana has seen peaceful alternation of power between parties for decades (International IDEA, 2025.). It performs well on global democracy indices and maintains strong institutions. However, recent events suggest emerging strains. In April 2025, Ghana's president suspended the Chief Justice amid a fraud probe an action legal experts warned "raised concerns about judicial independence and due process" (Idowu & Mimiko, 2020). A new constitution is being debated to tighten executive oversight of the judiciary. Public opinion surveys (Afrobarometer, 2025) have also recorded declining satisfaction with democracy in Ghana, with citizens citing unemployment, inflation, and corruption as growing concerns. In summary, Ghana still exhibits high democratic scores (top 25% worldwide for civic engagement) , but it is not immune to challenges: economic distress and political pressures are testing its resilience (Ayelazuno & Shahadu, 2022). Its main point of divergence from Nigeria is that Ghana's institutions have generally held up and constitutional processes remain largely respected, whereas Nigeria's have faltered (Framo, 2024).

### 5.5.2. Senegal

Once a West African exemplar, Senegal has in recent years slipped into crisis. President Macky Sall's decision to postpone the February 2024 election via an "unconstitutional decree" was widely denounced as a constitutional coup (Jones & Gregory, 2024). This blatant exercise of executive power subverted electoral law purely for political advantage, illustrating acute backsliding. Furthermore, the state's response to protests was brutal: dozens of Senegalese and diaspora demonstrators were beaten or shot dead in 2023, and the government even banned the press from broadcasting images of the unrest (Yabi & Holman, 2024). International human rights groups (e.g. HRW, Amnesty) report that Sall's regime has "weaponized the judiciary" to jail opposition leaders and silence dissent (Utip, 2025). In effect, Senegal's recent trajectory is worse than Nigeria's: it has abandoned formal democracy altogether and faces an open breakdown of rule of law (Yabi & Holman, 2024). Nigeria, by contrast, continues to hold elections and maintain some pluralism, even if deeply flawed. Nonetheless, both countries now share a pattern of executive disregard for constitutional limits and shrinking spaces for dissent.

### 5.5.3. Mali

In stark contrast, Mali no longer even pretends at democracy. After two military coups (2020, 2021), the junta under Gen. Assimi Goïta has openly banned all political parties and delayed any return to civilian rule (Al Jazeera, 2025). Human Rights Watch documents a "relentless assault" on democratic institutions: the junta dissolved opposition groups, forcibly disappeared opponents, and arrested journalists on spurious charges (Njie, 2025). Elections have been indefinitely postponed while the junta selects its own transition (even seeking to extend its leader's term to 2030). Mali's case exemplifies complete democratic breakdown, far beyond Nigeria's current situation. In regional perspective, Nigeria's decline aligns closer to a hybrid regime model, whereas Mali represents outright authoritarian control. One similarity is that both have witnessed the subordination of law to security concerns: Nigeria's insecurity and Mali's coup-makers each justify expanding power as necessary.

In sum, the regional comparison highlights that institutional decline is a cross-national phenomenon in West Africa. Yet outcomes vary: Ghana maintains a largely functioning democracy (though with cautionary signs), Nigeria shows pronounced backsliding but retains democratic façade, and Senegal and Mali have effectively reversed democratic gains. This pattern suggests that once-strong institutions in the region are now under shared stress from populist pressures, security threats, and political opportunism (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2022)

## 6. Discussion

The evidence underscores a troubling convergence: democratic forms are persisting in name across West Africa, but their substance is waning. In Nigeria, the weakening of the judiciary and electoral bodies erodes checks on power, consistent with predictions of Institutional Theory and Competitive Authoritarianism (Udofia et al, 2025; Nzereogu, 2024). The executive's expanding reach through legal maneuvers (Rivers State) or security justifications (internally) reveals how one branch can subvert the constitutional order when others falter. This dynamic has clear implications for governance: as legislative and judicial oversight weaken, policy mistakes (like sudden subsidy removal) go uncorrected, fueling public discontent (Nonju & Abo, 2024). Nigeria's internal security dilemma (Boko Haram, insurgencies) also worsens under democratic decline, as corrupt practices and politicized security forces undermine effective responses (Akosu & Edward, 2023).

Regionally, Nigeria's backsliding has knock-on effects. Nigeria traditionally anchors ECOWAS and regional security cooperation; its democratic collapse would leave a vacuum. Already, the rise of military regimes in Mali (and neighbors) challenges ECOWAS's credibility. Nigerian commitment to democratic norms (e.g. in ECOWAS interventions) is itself weakened when domestic institutions are compromised (Olubiyo & Ayodele, 2024). Moreover, shared patterns of electoral fraud and intolerance of dissent fuel cross-border instability. For instance, Nigeria's endemic election violence encourages arms smuggling and migration into West Africa, and Nigeria's failures in public goods provision can exacerbate regional economic strain.

These developments are not inevitable. The case studies illustrate those institutional choices matter: Ghana's continued legitimacy hinges on inclusive dialogue and respect for process, while Senegal's crisis stemmed from one leader's decision to ignore the rules. Nigeria can still salvage its democracy if reforms are enacted. Our findings align with democratic theory: without strong, impartial institutions, formal politics become a charade and citizens lose faith (Olatunji, 2025). Public trust is already fragile; Afrobarometer surveys show Nigerians largely disappointed with government performance. If the social contract unravels (citizens feel rules no longer apply equally), we risk political polarization or even violence (Afrobarometer, 2025b).

Considering these challenges, it is clear that comprehensive reform is needed. The literature and this analysis point to several strategic imperatives. First, judicial reform is crucial: making the judiciary truly independent will help enforce election laws and check abuses. Second, electoral reform is urgent: ambiguous provisions must be clarified, INEC's autonomy assured (the EU calls for a transparent appointment process), and election-day logistics improved. Third, legislative empowerment can restore balance: strengthening parliament's oversight role will deter executive overreach. Fourth, protecting civil society and media is essential to generate accountability; laws should ensure free expression and journalists' safety. Finally, broad anti-corruption and economic reforms must address citizens' grievances (e.g. equitable subsidies, social spending) to rebuild legitimacy. The following recommendations summarize these lessons:

1. **Strengthen Judicial Independence:** Ensure that judges are appointed on merit, provided security of tenure, and insulated from political interference. Expediently implement judicial service reforms so that an "*independent court*" can effectively resolve election disputes. Bolster judicial budgets and enforce codes of conduct to restore public confidence.
2. **Electoral Integrity Enhancements:** Adopt stricter regulations to prevent electoral malpractices (vote-buying, intimidation) and hold perpetrators accountable. Reform INEC by following the EU's advice: remove legal ambiguities, subject Commissioners to transparent selection, and commit to real-time result publishing. Improve voter education and polling logistics to avoid delays and confusion.
3. **Democratize the Legislature:** Empower the National Assembly and state assemblies by reinforcing their oversight capacities. For example, override clauses or emergency powers should require legislative approval. Prevent unchecked executive suspension of local governments (as began to happen in some states). More broadly, cultivate internal democracy within parties to reduce elite capture, thereby making legislative bodies more representative.
4. **Protect Civil Liberties:** Repeal or amend repressive laws that curb freedom of expression. Enforce laws against police brutality and protect the right to peaceful assembly. In particular, internet shutdowns and media bans (like those in Senegal) must be avoided. Encourage independent media outlets and civil society, as they are vital watchdogs. At

the same time, regulate misinformation and hate speech on social media to reduce incitement without unduly limiting debate.

5. **Combat Corruption and Economic Grievances:** Address the underlying corruption that fuels distrust in institutions. For instance, transparent procurement for security forces will improve anti-terror efforts and limit excuses for militarized governance. Share oil and gas revenues more equitably and target subsidies to the poor, rebuilding legitimacy in public institutions. Effective anti-corruption agencies and asset-recovery initiatives (as with the Abacha and Ibori cases) demonstrate commitment to rule of law.
6. **Regional and International Support:** ECOWAS and partners must remain vigilant. Nigeria should advocate for regional enforcement of democratic norms (as it once did for Mali/Niger) but also model good governance domestically. International assistance (e.g. technical support for INEC, judicial exchanges) can help build capacity. Moreover, civil society networks across West Africa should collaborate in resisting autocratization, taking cues from successful pro-democracy movements elsewhere.

Implementing these reforms will be challenging, but they follow logically from the analysis. As Obasun (2025) conclude, only by “restoring civil rights and strengthening democratic institutions” can Nigeria avoid entrenching a pseudo-democratic system.

## 6. Discussion

Nigeria’s democratic backsliding is a multifaceted crisis rooted in institutional decay. Over the past two decades, gains of the Fourth Republic have been undermined by electoral fraud, executive dominance, and weakened courts. Our comparative analysis shows that these patterns are part of a broader West African trend: even Senegal and Ghana once democratic models are showing stress, while Mali has entirely reverted to military rule. For Nigeria, the key lessons are that formal procedures alone do not guarantee democracy; the quality of institutions and adherence to the spirit of the constitution are equally critical.

This article has synthesized empirical evidence to illustrate how Nigeria’s current trajectory aligns with hybrid authoritarian regimes: elections occur, but democratic norms and civil liberties erode under the surface. We have also identified specific national and regional factors contributing to this slide, from corruption and security challenges to shifting international dynamics.

Crucially, we have offered concrete policy recommendations aimed at reversing the decline. Strengthening the independence and capacity of the judiciary and election bodies, imposing checks on executive power, and safeguarding citizens’ freedoms are essential steps. Many of these proposals are echoed in recent studies of Nigeria’s democracy. The goal is a diversified strategy that includes legal reforms, institutional restructuring, and societal interventions. Only by rebuilding trust in institutions can Nigeria restore its democratic momentum.

Nigeria’s future, and that of West African democracy more broadly, hinges on these actions. If reforms are implemented, it could set an example for resistance to autocratization in the region. If not, the country risks sliding further toward dysfunction and instability, with implications for all of ECOWAS. Ultimately, vigilant civil society, courageous leadership, and international support will be needed to ensure that democracy in Nigeria does not become mere formality but remains a living and accountable system.

### Conflict of Interest:

There is no conflict of Interest.

### Declaration of Artificial Intelligence:

This work is the original creation of the authors; AI support was limited to grammar correction and improving expression.

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