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Decentralisation without Autonomy: Elite Capture and the Political Economy of Local Governance in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Decentralisation has been widely promoted as a mechanism for enhancing democratic governance, accountability, and service delivery, particularly in developing countries. In Nigeria, however, the formal adoption of decentralised structures has not translated into meaningful local government autonomy, raising important questions about the political realities underpinning governance reforms. Although existing scholarship has generated important insights into decentralisation, local government autonomy, fiscal arrangements, governance performance, and elite capture, comparatively less attention has been given to explaining how the political and institutional mechanisms through which elite actors constrain local autonomy shape governance outcomes within decentralised systems. This study examines the paradox of decentralisation without autonomy by investigating how, and through what political and institutional mechanisms, federal- and state-level elites constrain local government autonomy in Nigeria, and with what implications for governance and citizen engagement. Adopting a political economy perspective, the study draws on secondary data from constitutional provisions, policy documents, audit reports, and empirical studies, which are analysed using qualitative content and thematic analysis. The findings show that fiscal centralisation, administrative interference, and patronage networks constitute the principal mechanisms through which local autonomy is constrained. While state governments are the primary actors through which these mechanisms operate, federal institutions also sustain the broader constitutional and intergovernmental framework that enables them. Consequently, local governments function less as autonomous centres of governance than as dependent institutions operating within a hierarchical political system. The study contributes to decentralisation, political economy, and public administration scholarship by advancing a mechanism-based explanation of how formal decentralisation can coexist with enduring patterns of elite control, thereby informing ongoing debates on decentralisation reform in Nigeria and comparable contexts.

Introduction

Decentralisation has become one of the most widely promoted governance reforms in developing countries, often justified on the grounds that it enhances democratic participation, improves service delivery, and strengthens accountability by bringing government closer to the people (Chattopadhyay, 2023). The normative rationale for decentralisation is further grounded in the principle of subsidiarity, which holds that public responsibilities should be exercised by the lowest level of government capable of performing them effectively, thereby promoting responsiveness, efficiency, and democratic accountability (Oates, 1999). Accordingly, decentralisation has been widely promoted in both policy and academic discourse as a governance strategy for improving public sector performance through the transfer of political, administrative, and fiscal authority to subnational governments. However, the extent to which these normative expectations are realised remains contingent upon the political and institutional contexts within which decentralised governance operates. This tension is particularly evident in many postcolonial states, including Nigeria, where formal decentralisation has not consistently translated into meaningful local autonomy.

Nigeria provides a particularly compelling case for interrogating this gap between formal institutional design and political reality. Although the country's federal structure constitutionally recognises local governments as a third tier of governance, their practical autonomy remains highly constrained. Rather than functioning as independent centres of local governance, they are often embedded within hierarchical systems of fiscal, administrative, and political control exercised by higher tiers of government (Ikeanyibe, 2016). This tension raises important questions about the actual nature and consequences of decentralisation in contexts characterised by entrenched power asymmetries.

Studies on decentralisation in Nigeria have extensively examined issues such as institutional design, fiscal arrangements, governance performance, and local government autonomy (Ahmad, Tabi'u, & Mohamed, 2013; Asaju, 2010; Bello, 2013). Similarly, a substantial body of scholarship has examined decentralisation, local governance, and elite capture across developing countries, highlighting issues relating to institutional design, implementation challenges, and governance outcomes (Avlijas & Bartlett, 2011; Wong, 2010; Zaidi, 2005). Despite these important contributions, existing studies have generally examined institutional design, fiscal arrangements, governance performance, and elite influence as separate lines of inquiry. Comparatively less attention has been given to integrating these strands within a political economy framework that explains the specific political and institutional mechanisms through which local government autonomy is constrained and reproduced within decentralised governance systems. Consequently, existing scholarship provides limited explanation of why formal decentralisation often coexists with persistent patterns of hierarchical political control despite successive constitutional and institutional reforms.

This study addresses this analytical gap by examining the paradox of decentralisation without autonomy in Nigeria through a political economy lens. It asks: how, and through what political and institutional mechanisms, do federal- and state-level elites constrain the autonomy of local governments in Nigeria, and with what implications for governance and citizen engagement? By focusing on mechanisms of fiscal control, administrative interference, and patronage-based networks, the study moves beyond formal institutional analysis to interrogate the underlying power relations that structure decentralised governance in practice. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary debates in decentralisation, political economy, and public administration by advancing a mechanism-based explanation of how formal decentralisation may coexist with enduring patterns of elite control and constrained local autonomy. Rather than viewing decentralisation solely through the lens of institutional design, the study demonstrates the importance of examining the political and institutional processes through which authority is negotiated, exercised, and constrained across levels of government.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on decentralisation, elite capture, and local governance. This is followed by the theoretical framework that underpins the study. The subsequent section presents the methodology, after which the findings are analysed and discussed. The paper concludes by summarising the key findings, highlighting their theoretical and policy implications, acknowledging the study's limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

Literature Review

The Political Economy of Decentralisation and the Crisis of Local Autonomy

This section reviews existing scholarship on decentralisation and local governance, with particular attention to the political economy of decentralised governance. It examines how institutional arrangements, power relations, and elite interests shape the operation and outcomes of decentralisation in practice, before situating these debates within the Nigerian context. Rather than approaching decentralisation as a purely administrative reform, the review critically engages the literature to show how political incentives and institutional arrangements influence governance outcomes across different contexts. The review is organised around three interrelated themes: the promises and political realities of decentralisation; the political economy of decentralisation and elite capture; and the specific dynamics of local governance in Nigeria. By identifying areas of convergence, divergence, and limitation within the existing literature, the section establishes the analytical foundation for understanding the paradox of decentralisation without autonomy and clarifies the study's contribution to contemporary debates in public administration and decentralised governance.

Decentralisation: Promises vs. Political Realities

The normative appeal of decentralisation is predicated on the premise that transferring authority and resources to sub-national units enhances allocative efficiency, promotes grassroots participation, and fosters institutional accountability (Chattopadhyay, 2023). Within the broader decentralisation literature, the normative rationale for transferring authority to subnational governments is commonly grounded in the principle of subsidiarity, which holds that public functions should be exercised by the lowest level of government capable of performing them effectively. Consequently, decentralisation is viewed not merely as an administrative reform but as a governance strategy for improving responsiveness, accountability, and democratic participation (Oates, 1999). Scholars of decentralisation further distinguish between different forms of decentralisation, including deconcentration, delegation, devolution, and privatisation, alongside fiscal, political, and administrative decentralisation, each involving varying degrees of authority transferred from higher to lower levels of government (Rondinelli, 1981; Rondinelli, Nellis, & Cheema, 1983). Among these, devolution is generally regarded as the strongest form because it transfers decision-making authority, financial responsibility, and political accountability to constitutionally recognised subnational governments (Rondinelli, 1981).

However, these normative expectations are neither automatic nor universally realised. Rather than assuming that decentralisation inherently produces responsive governance, a growing body of scholarship argues that its outcomes depend on the broader political and institutional environment within which authority is exercised. This distinction is particularly important in federal systems such as Nigeria, where decentralisation extends beyond local governments to include constitutionally recognised state governments. Accordingly, this study focuses specifically on local government autonomy as one dimension of decentralised governance, examining how political and institutional arrangements shape its operation in practice.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly identifies a significant "implementation gap" between the developmental promises of decentralisation and the complex political realities of the Global South. Rather than a neutral administrative reform, decentralisation is fundamentally a political process shaped by the interests and survival strategies of dominant actors (Eaton et al., 2010). Empirical evidence across contexts illustrates how decentralisation is often instrumentalised to restructure, rather than relinquish, central control. In Pakistan, for instance, military regimes deployed local government reforms to bypass provincial opposition while consolidating authority at the centre (Zaidi, 2005). Similarly, in Ghana, decentralisation operates as a political phenomenon aligned with clientelist imperatives, limiting its capacity to improve service delivery (Abdul-Gafaru, 2017). In Serbia, the devolution of administrative responsibilities without corresponding fiscal authority produced systemic governance failures (Avlijas & Bartlett, 2011).

In Nigeria, the historical trajectory of local government reforms reflects a similar pattern. While the 1976 reforms promised grassroots development, subsequent constitutional arrangements created ambiguities that have enabled state-level actors to retain effective control over local institutions (Adeyemo, 2005). As a result, the “local turn” in governance often obscures a persistent reality of topdown dominance, where decentralised units function as administrative extensions rather than autonomous centres of decision-making (Warren & Visser, 2016).

Political Economy of Decentralisation and Elite Capture

The political economy of decentralisation provides a critical lens for understanding how institutional reforms are shaped by power relations, incentives, and entrenched political settlements. Rather than redistributing authority, decentralisation can create new arenas through which elites consolidate control, giving rise to processes of elite capture—the systematic diversion of public resources and decision-making authority toward dominant groups (Dutta, 2009). The literature increasingly conceptualises elite capture as a multidimensional process through which politically influential actors shape institutional rules, control access to public resources, influence administrative decision-making, and redirect governance processes to preserve existing power relations. Rather than referring solely to corruption or the misappropriation of public resources, elite capture also encompasses the strategic use of formal institutions, legal arrangements, and intergovernmental structures to maintain political dominance. Building on this understanding, the present study examines elite capture through three interrelated institutional mechanisms: fiscal control over local resources, administrative interference in local governance processes, and patronage networks that shape political incentives and accountability relationships.

Empirical studies demonstrate that participatory and decentralised institutions do not inherently democratise governance; instead, they may reproduce or deepen existing inequalities. Rigon's (2014) study of Kenya shows how participatory frameworks can reinforce elite dominance when marginalised groups lack the resources to contest established interests. Similarly, Waheduzzaman, As-Saber, and Hamid (2018) identify a persistent nexus between local elites, bureaucrats, and political actors that systematically shapes development outcomes in favour of privileged groups. Crucially, this nexus is not incidental but reflects embedded power relations within decentralised systems, where formal institutional arrangements provide opportunities for coordinated elite control rather than broad-based participation. Across these studies, a consistent pattern emerges: decentralised institutions do not automatically disperse power. Instead, governance outcomes are contingent upon the political incentives embedded within institutional arrangements, thereby shifting analytical attention from the formal transfer of authority to the conditions under which authority is exercised and controlled.

Importantly, elite capture operates not only through overt corruption but also through the strategic manipulation of formal institutional rules, enabling selection bias in the allocation of public goods (Dutta, 2009). Persha and Andersson (2014) further demonstrate that local institutional arrangements themselves can structure opportunities for capture, particularly in resource governance contexts. Wong (2010) adds that both exclusionary and inclusionary elite strategies, whether bypassing or co-opting elites, can generate different but equally enduring forms of domination. These dynamics underscore that decentralisation reforms are embedded within broader systems of patronage, rent-seeking, and political bargaining, where actors seek to preserve favourable power configurations (Tidemand, 2010). In this sense, decentralisation does not diminish elite influence but reconfigures the mechanisms through which control is exercised, particularly across different tiers of government. While some strands of the decentralisation literature continue to emphasise institutional design and administrative capacity as the principal determinants of governance performance, political economy scholarship argues that these explanations are incomplete unless they account for how power asymmetries shape the operation of decentralised institutions (Eaton et al., 2010). From this perspective, decentralisation cannot be evaluated solely by the formal existence of devolved structures but by the extent to which those structures exercise meaningful political, fiscal, and administrative autonomy. This distinction provides an important analytical bridge between decentralisation, elite capture, and governance outcomes, and forms the conceptual basis for examining why constitutionally recognised local governments in Nigeria remain substantively constrained despite formal decentralisation reforms.

Local Governance in Nigeria: The Autonomy Paradox

In the Nigerian federation, the status of local government is defined by a profound autonomy paradox. Sections 7 and 162 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended), together with the Fourth Schedule, provide constitutional recognition for local government, guarantee its democratic existence, assign core functional responsibilities, and establish the fiscal framework governing intergovernmental transfers. Although the Constitution formally recognises local government as a third tier of governance, scholars have consistently argued that these constitutional provisions simultaneously create institutional ambiguities that enable extensive state-level oversight and intervention (Ikeanyibe, 2016). This illustrates an important distinction between the constitutional existence of local government and its practical autonomy, a distinction that lies at the centre of debates on decentralised governance in Nigeria.

These contradictions are most evident in the operation of the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), which has evolved into a central mechanism for fiscal control (Asaju, 2010). Through the SJLGA, state governments exercise significant discretion over local revenues, effectively undermining financial independence and constraining service delivery capacity (Okafor, 2010). Empirical studies highlight the consequences of this arrangement. In Kaduna State, mismanagement of the Joint Account significantly weakened the provision of primary healthcare and infrastructure (Bello, 2013), while in Enugu State, it has been described as a "drainage pipe" diverting resources away from grassroots development (Fred & Eneiga, 2022). Beyond fiscal control, the literature suggests that state governments maintain influence over local governance through a broader set of institutional and administrative mechanisms. These include the supervisory functions of Ministries of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, the oversight exercised by Local Government Service Commissions, the recurrent appointment of caretaker committees in place of democratically elected councils, and the organisation of local government elections through State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs). Rather than operating as purely administrative arrangements, these institutions have been widely identified as mechanisms through which state governments shape local political processes, constrain institutional autonomy, and reinforce the dependence of local governments on state political authorities.

Fiscal dependence is reinforced by administrative mechanisms of control. State executives frequently dissolve elected local councils or influence leadership selection processes, ensuring political alignment and limiting institutional autonomy (Adedire, 2014). Moreover, intergovernmental relations are characterised by institutional disarray, weak coordination, and unresolved conflicts over revenue and jurisdiction (Bello, 2014; Ogirima, 2020; Chima et al., 2018). These overlapping mechanisms, fiscal centralisation, administrative interference, and political patronage, produce a dependency syndrome in which local governments operate primarily as extensions of state authority rather than autonomous governance units (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2015; Arugu, 2016). Consequently, the persistence of elite control at subnational levels reflects a broader tension between formal federalist structures and centralised political practice (Olaiya, 2016; Doho, Ahmed, & Umar, 2018). Although studies on Nigerian local government have devoted considerable attention to the influence of state governments, comparatively less attention has been paid to the role of federal institutions in sustaining this governance architecture through constitutional design, fiscal arrangements, and broader intergovernmental frameworks. This imbalance has resulted in a stronger emphasis on state-level constraints than on the interaction between federal and state actors in shaping local government autonomy.

More recently, the July 11, 2024 judgment of the Supreme Court of Nigeria has renewed scholarly and policy interest in local government autonomy by affirming direct statutory allocations to local governments, rejecting the unconstitutional withholding of local government funds by state governments, and declaring the continued operation of unelected caretaker committees inconsistent with constitutional principles (Attorney General of the Federation v. Attorney General of Abia State & 35 Others, SC/CV/343/2024, Supreme Court of Nigeria, July 11, 2024). While the long-term implications of this judgment remain the subject of ongoing debate, it represents a significant institutional development that has reinvigorated discussions regarding the future of decentralised governance and intergovernmental relations in Nigeria.

Despite extensive scholarship on decentralisation and local governance in Nigeria, existing studies largely focus on institutional design, fiscal arrangements, and performance outcomes, with limited attention to the underlying political dynamics that produce the persistent gap between formal decentralisation and actual local autonomy. In particular, insufficient analytical focus has been given to the specific political and institutional mechanisms through which elite actors systematically constrain local governments within intergovernmental structures. Similarly, while the broader literature on elite capture highlights patterns of domination, it does not adequately explain how such dynamics are embedded and reproduced within decentralised governance systems, nor their implications for governance outcomes and citizen engagement. Existing studies have generally examined institutional design, fiscal arrangements, governance performance, or elite influence as separate lines of inquiry. Comparatively less attention has been given to analysing how these strands can be integrated within a single political economy framework to explain why formal decentralisation has not translated into substantive local autonomy. This study addresses these gaps by advancing a mechanism-based political economy analysis of how both federal- and state-level elites shape, constrain, and reproduce local governance in Nigeria. By shifting analytical attention from institutional outcomes to the political and institutional mechanisms through which local autonomy is constrained, the study contributes to contemporary public administration scholarship on decentralised governance by demonstrating how formal institutional reforms may coexist with enduring patterns of elite control.

Theoretical Framework: Political Economy, Elite Capture, and Decentralised Governance

This study is anchored in a political economy perspective that conceptualises decentralisation not as a neutral administrative reform, but as a contested process shaped by power relations, institutional incentives, and elite interests (Eaton et al., 2010; Tidemand, 2010). Conventional approaches to decentralisation often assume that the transfer of authority to subnational governments enhances efficiency, accountability, and citizen participation. However, such assumptions tend to overlook the extent to which decentralised institutions are embedded within broader political settlements that condition how authority is exercised in practice. From a political economy standpoint, decentralisation is better understood as a reconfiguration of power across levels of government, rather than a straightforward devolution of authority. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where formal decentralisation coexists with persistent asymmetries in intergovernmental power relations.

Within this framework, the concept of elite capture provides a critical lens for analysing how decentralised governance structures can be appropriated by dominant actors. Elite capture refers to the processes through which individuals or groups with disproportionate political, economic, or social power influence decision-making and resource allocation to serve their interests (Waheduzzaman et al., 2018). Importantly, this influence is not always exercised through overtly illegal means; it often operates through the strategic use of formal institutional rules, administrative procedures, and political networks. In decentralised systems, such dynamics can manifest through the control of fiscal flows, manipulation of local political processes, and the reinforcement of patronage-based relationships that privilege elite interests over collective welfare. In the Nigerian context, these mechanisms are institutionalised through party-political machineries and extra-constitutional intergovernmental arrangements that facilitate the downward radiation of elite interests. Examples include the operation of the State Joint Local

Government Account, the appointment of caretaker committees in place of elected councils, and the use of state-controlled electoral institutions to shape local political competition. These arrangements illustrate how formal decentralised structures can be utilised to sustain elite influence over local governance rather than enhance institutional autonomy.

To capture these dynamics, this study conceptualises local government autonomy as a multidimensional construct encompassing fiscal independence, administrative discretion, and political self-governance. Constraints on autonomy are therefore understood as the outcome of specific political and institutional mechanisms that limit the capacity of local governments to make independent decisions and respond to local needs.

The interaction between decentralisation and elite capture is particularly evident in the context of intergovernmental relations. Rather than creating autonomous centres of governance, decentralised systems may generate hierarchical dependencies in which subnational units remain subject to the authority of higher-level actors (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2015). This is especially pronounced where fiscal and administrative powers are unevenly distributed, enabling central- or state-level elites to retain effective control over local institutions. In such contexts, decentralisation does not eliminate centralisation; instead, it transforms the mechanisms through which control is exercised, often making them less visible but equally consequential. The Nigerian federal system exemplifies this dynamic, where formal constitutional provisions coexist with practices that reinforce state-level dominance over local governments. These mechanisms include, but are not limited to, fiscal centralisation, administrative interference, and the operation of patronage networks that align local governance with elite interests, patterns that are particularly salient within Nigeria's intergovernmental framework.

By integrating political economy and elite capture perspectives, this framework provides an analytical basis for examining how decentralisation reforms can reproduce, rather than transform, existing power structures. It shifts the focus from formal institutional design to the underlying processes through which authority is negotiated, constrained, and exercised. In doing so, it enables a more nuanced understanding of the paradox of decentralisation without autonomy, particularly in contexts such as Nigeria, where formal federal structures coexist with persistent patterns of centralised political control.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a political economy approach to examine the dynamics of decentralisation and local governance in Nigeria. Given the study's focus on analysing the political and institutional mechanisms through which elite actors constrain local government autonomy, a qualitative strategy is well suited to examining the complex power relations embedded within decentralised systems (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study relies exclusively on secondary documentary sources because its primary objective is to analyse the institutional and political mechanisms underpinning decentralised governance rather than individual perceptions or lived experiences. Documentary analysis is particularly appropriate for examining constitutional arrangements, intergovernmental relations, policy implementation, and governance reforms that are embedded in formal institutional records and scholarly analyses.

The documentary evidence comprised constitutional provisions, policy documents, government reports, audit reports, judicial decisions, official publications, and peer-reviewed empirical studies on decentralisation, local governance, and intergovernmental relations in Nigeria. Documents were selected purposively based on three criteria: (i) direct relevance to local government autonomy and decentralised governance in Nigeria; (ii) substantive discussion of institutional, fiscal, administrative, or political mechanisms affecting local government operations; and (iii) credibility, demonstrated through publication by recognised government institutions, judicial authorities, or reputable academic outlets. Documents that did not address these issues directly or lacked sufficient analytical relevance were excluded from the analysis.

Qualitative content and thematic analyses were employed to examine the data systematically. The analysis followed an iterative process. First, all selected documents were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with their content. Second, meaningful text segments relating to local government autonomy, intergovernmental relations, and governance constraints were identified and coded. Third, related codes were grouped into broader analytical categories through thematic analysis. This process enabled the identification of recurring institutional mechanisms that explain how decentralisation operates in practice within the Nigerian context.

The analytical framework was informed by the study's political economy and elite capture perspective. Rather than allowing themes to emerge entirely inductively, coding was guided by theoretically informed analytical categories derived from the literature and refined through repeated engagement with the documentary evidence. Specifically, fiscal control, administrative interference, and patronage networks were identified as the principal institutional mechanisms through which elite actors constrain local government autonomy because these themes consistently recurred across constitutional provisions, policy documents, government reports, judicial decisions, and empirical studies. These categories subsequently served as the analytical lens through which governance outcomes were interpreted.

The study is primarily interpretive and explanatory in orientation. Rather than seeking to quantify the extent of decentralisation or autonomy, it focuses on analysing how institutional arrangements and political incentives shape governance outcomes. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the relationship between formal structures and actual practice, particularly in contexts where informal dynamics play a significant role.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, evidence was triangulated across multiple documentary sources, including constitutional provisions, policy documents, judicial decisions, official reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship. Comparing evidence across these diverse sources helped strengthen interpretive consistency and minimise reliance on any single account or perspective. Throughout the analysis, interpretations were continually assessed against the broader documentary evidence to enhance analytical credibility and reduce the risk of selective interpretation.

Although the exclusive reliance on documentary evidence limits direct engagement with the perspectives of policy actors and other stakeholders, the study is designed to explain institutional processes rather than individual experiences. Consequently, secondary documentary analysis provides an appropriate and robust basis for examining the political and institutional mechanisms through which elite interests shape decentralised governance in Nigeria.

Results and Discussion

Building on the political economy approach outlined in the theoretical framework and the qualitative analysis of secondary data described in the methodology, the following section presents the analytical and interpretive discussion of the findings. The analysis is organised around the central argument that while decentralisation in Nigeria formally distributes authority across federal, state, and local levels of government, local government autonomy remains substantively constrained by political and institutional mechanisms operating within this intergovernmental framework. Rather than treating decentralisation as a uniform or purely institutional reform, the discussion focuses on the specific political and institutional mechanisms through which local government autonomy is structured, limited, and reproduced. These mechanisms are examined across four interrelated dimensions: the paradox of decentralisation without autonomy, the fiscal and administrative instruments of control, the role of patronage networks and elite capture in shaping local governance outcomes, and the implications of these dynamics for governance performance and citizen engagement. Together, these analytical strands provide a coherent explanation of how decentralised governance functions in practice and how power is negotiated across federal, state, and local levels of government in Nigeria.

The Paradox of Decentralisation without Autonomy

Nigeria presents a clear illustration of what this study conceptualises as the paradox of decentralisation without autonomy. Formally, the country's constitutional framework recognises the system of local government as an integral component of governance. Section 7(1) of the 1999 Constitution guarantees "the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils," thereby establishing a legal basis for grassroots administration and participatory governance. In principle, this arrangement aligns with the normative expectations of decentralisation, which emphasise autonomy, accountability, and responsiveness at the local level.

In practice, however, the operational reality of local governance reflects a pronounced disjuncture between formal constitutional provisions and actual political control. While local governments are constitutionally recognised, their capacity to exercise independent authority is significantly constrained by fiscal dependence, administrative subordination, and political interference from higher tiers of government (Arugu, 2016; Fred & Eneiga, 2022). This disjuncture is evident in the limited discretion local councils possess over financial resources, the instability of their leadership structures, and their restricted ability to define and implement locally responsive policies. Consequently, the formal architecture of decentralisation coexists with a governance reality in which effective decision-making power is largely concentrated outside the local sphere. Rather than functioning as autonomous units of governance, local governments in Nigeria operate within a highly constrained intergovernmental environment characterised by strong state-level influence and limited institutional independence (Doho et al., 2018). This finding underscores an important distinction between decentralisation as a broader system of intergovernmental governance and local government autonomy as a specific institutional outcome. While Nigeria operates a constitutionally decentralised federal system, the effective autonomy of local governments remains constrained by political and institutional arrangements that limit their capacity for independent decision-making.

From a political economy perspective, this contradiction persists because decentralisation reforms have altered the formal distribution of governmental responsibilities without fundamentally transforming the underlying incentives of political actors. State and federal elites continue to derive political, fiscal, and administrative advantages from maintaining influence over local governments, creating limited incentives to relinquish effective control. Consequently, institutional reforms that expand the formal authority of local governments are frequently accompanied by parallel mechanisms that preserve elite influence over local governance. This helps explain why successive constitutional and policy reforms have produced institutional continuity rather than substantive decentralisation.

This contradiction is not incidental but structurally embedded in the country's federal arrangement, where constitutional provisions and administrative practices create overlapping and often ambiguous lines of authority that weaken local discretion. As a result, constitutional recognition does not translate into substantive autonomy.

This paradox is further reinforced by the trajectory of decentralisation reforms in Nigeria. The 1976 Local Government Reforms sought to standardise and strengthen local administration by recognising local governments as distinct entities within the federal structure. Similarly, the 1999 Constitution reaffirmed their institutional status, while the Fourth Schedule outlines the functions of local governments and Sections 7 and 162 provide for their democratic existence and fiscal framework (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, as amended). However, these reforms have largely expanded the formal architecture of subnational governance without fundamentally altering the underlying distribution of power between federal, state, and local actors. Instead of redistributing authority, they have often institutionalised arrangements that allow higher-level actors to retain decisive control over local governance processes. This pattern supports the political economy argument advanced in this study that decentralisation reforms may reconfigure rather than redistribute power, allowing existing political settlements to adapt while preserving established relationships of authority.

In this context, decentralisation in Nigeria functions less as a mechanism of devolution and more as a reconfiguration of control, where authority is formally dispersed but substantively retained. The result is a governance structure in which local governments are positioned as implementing arms of state-level political and administrative interests rather than autonomous centres of local decision-making. Rather than enhancing downward accountability to citizens, this institutional arrangement frequently reinforces upward accountability to state political actors, weakening the responsiveness of local governments to community priorities and reducing opportunities for meaningful democratic participation. This disjuncture between form and substance is not merely an institutional anomaly; it reflects deeper political incentives that favour the maintenance of hierarchical control within a formally decentralised system. Viewed through the lens of elite capture, the persistence of this arrangement reflects the capacity of dominant political actors to shape institutional rules in ways that preserve control over local authority, public resources, and political competition. It is this contradiction that defines the central paradox explored in this study and provides the foundation for analysing the mechanisms through which local autonomy is constrained.

Fiscal and Administrative Mechanisms of Control

A central mechanism through which local government autonomy is constrained in Nigeria is the structure of fiscal and administrative control embedded within intergovernmental relations. While decentralisation is expected to grant subnational governments discretion over financial resources and administrative decision-making, the Nigerian case demonstrates a persistent pattern of centralised control that significantly limits local autonomy in practice. Fiscal dependence constitutes one of the most consequential constraints on local governance. Although local governments are constitutionally entitled to statutory allocations from the Federation Account, the disbursement and utilisation of these funds are mediated through the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) (Agbani & Ugwoke, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2013). In principle, this arrangement is intended to facilitate coordination and oversight. In practice, however, it has become a key instrument through which state governments exercise control over local resources. By determining the timing, allocation, and, in some cases, the effective access to these funds, state authorities significantly reduce the fiscal independence of local governments, thereby limiting their capacity to plan and execute development priorities.

This fiscal arrangement produces a structural dependency that is not merely administrative but political, as it enables state-level actors to condition local governance priorities through control over resource flows. In this sense, fiscal centralisation functions as an instrument of political leverage rather than a neutral coordination mechanism. As a result, local governments often possess formal expenditure responsibilities without corresponding financial discretion, creating a mismatch between constitutional responsibilities and institutional capacity. Their operational effectiveness is therefore constrained not only by resource scarcity but also by the discretionary power of state-level actors who mediate access to constitutionally guaranteed funds. From a political economy perspective, this arrangement persists because control over fiscal resources provides state political elites with significant leverage over local political actors, reinforcing existing patronage relationships and reducing the likelihood of independent local decision-making. This dynamic undermines one of the core assumptions of decentralisation, namely that financial autonomy enhances local responsiveness and service delivery.

The practical implications of this fiscal dependence are evident in documented cases where irregular releases or deductions from the SJLGA have constrained the delivery of primary healthcare, rural infrastructure, and other constitutionally assigned local government functions (Bello, 2013; Fred & Eneiga, 2022). These examples illustrate that fiscal centralisation affects not only institutional autonomy but also the quality and responsiveness of public service delivery at the grassroots.

In addition to fiscal constraints, administrative interference further weakens local government autonomy in Nigeria. State-level actors frequently exert influence over the appointment, tenure, and removal of local officials, thereby undermining the principle of electoral accountability at the local level. In several instances, elected local councils have been dissolved or replaced with caretaker committees, often appointed by state executives (Adedire, 2014; Akpan & Ekanem, 2013). Beyond caretaker arrangements, state governments also exercise influence through Ministries of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, which supervise local government administration, Local Government Service Commissions responsible for personnel administration, and State Independent Electoral Commissions, which conduct local government elections. Although these institutions perform legitimate administrative functions within the federal system, the literature suggests that their operation has frequently enabled state governments to shape local political processes, influence leadership selection, and constrain institutional independence. Such practices create institutional instability and reinforce upward accountability to state authorities rather than downward accountability to local populations. Consequently, local government officials may become more responsive to state political interests than to the communities they are constitutionally mandated to serve, thereby weakening democratic participation and citizen trust in local governance. These practices do not simply reflect institutional weakness but point to a broader pattern in which administrative authority is strategically deployed to align local governance with state-level political interests.

Recent institutional developments nevertheless suggest that this governance architecture may be undergoing important legal scrutiny. In its landmark judgment of 11 July 2024, the Supreme Court of Nigeria affirmed that statutory allocations should be paid directly to constitutionally recognised local governments, declared the withholding of local government allocations by state governments unconstitutional, and held that democratically elected local government councils, rather than caretaker committees, are consistent with the constitutional framework (Attorney General of the Federation v. Attorney General of Abia State & 35 Others, SC/CV/343/2024). From the perspective of this study, the judgment represents an important attempt to strengthen the constitutional foundations of local government autonomy. However, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the extent to which entrenched political and institutional practices are transformed in implementation. Consequently, the judgment should be understood not as the resolution of the autonomy question but as a significant institutional intervention whose long-term implications for intergovernmental relations remain contingent upon political compliance and enforcement.

Thus, fiscal centralisation and administrative interference operate as mutually reinforcing mechanisms of control. While fiscal dependency limits the material capacity of local governments to function independently, administrative interventions shape their political and institutional behaviour. Viewed through the lens of elite capture, these mechanisms enable dominant political actors to preserve influence over local governance by controlling both the resources available to local governments and the institutional processes through which local authority is exercised. The interaction of these mechanisms ensures that local governments remain embedded within a hierarchy of control in which substantive autonomy is significantly curtailed. In effect, decentralisation in Nigeria does not eliminate centralised authority; rather, it redistributes it through fiscal and administrative channels that preserve the dominance of state-level political actors. This helps explain why repeated constitutional and policy reforms have produced institutional continuity despite formal commitments to decentralisation. This configuration lies at the core of the decentralisation without autonomy paradox and provides a critical lens for understanding the persistence of constrained local governance in practice.

Patronage Networks and Elite Capture

Beyond formal fiscal and administrative constraints, the persistence of limited local government autonomy in Nigeria is also sustained through informal political networks and patterns of elite capture (Akpan & Ekanem, 2013; Waheduzzaman et al., 2018). These dynamics operate within and alongside formal institutions, shaping how decentralised authority is exercised in practice. Rather than being neutral arenas of governance, local government structures are embedded in broader systems of political bargaining, patronage distribution, and elite competition. Elite capture in this context refers to the ability of politically and economically powerful actors to influence or dominate local governance processes in ways that prioritise their interests over those of the wider population. In the Nigerian context, this is often manifested through networks that link federal, state, and local-level elites within shared political and party structures. These networks facilitate coordination among actors who seek to maintain access to public resources, control political appointments, and shape development priorities in ways that reinforce existing power hierarchies. Viewed through a political economy perspective, these networks are sustained because they provide mutually beneficial incentives for political actors across different levels of government, enabling them to preserve access to public resources and maintain existing distributions of power rather than promote autonomous local governance.

Patronage plays a central role in sustaining these arrangements. Local government resources, where accessible, are frequently allocated through politically mediated channels rather than based on institutional planning or local development needs. This creates incentives for local officials to align with state-level political interests, particularly where survival in office depends on patronage flows or political endorsement from higher levels of government. This pattern is evident in the influence that political actors often exercise over leadership appointments, candidate selection, budgetary priorities, and the implementation of development projects, reinforcing upward political accountability at the expense of responsiveness to local communities. As a result, local governance becomes less about autonomous decision-making and more about managing relationships within a broader hierarchy of political dependency.

Crucially, elite capture does not operate solely through coercion or direct intervention. It is also reproduced through institutionalised practices that normalise unequal access to resources and decision-making authority. Over time, this contributes to the consolidation of informal governance arrangements in which formal decentralisation structures are effectively repurposed to sustain elite bargaining systems. In such a context, decentralisation expands the number of institutional sites through which control can be exercised, rather than dispersing power in a meaningful way. The interaction between patronage networks and the structural constraints previously discussed creates a reinforcing cycle. Fiscal dependency and administrative interference provide the institutional conditions that enable elite capture, while patronage networks ensure that these constraints are socially and politically reproduced. This synergy explains why decentralisation in Nigeria has not translated into substantive local autonomy despite repeated reform efforts. The governance consequences extend beyond institutional autonomy. Where political patronage shapes local decision-making, accountability to citizens is weakened, public resources are less likely to reflect local development priorities, and citizen confidence in local democratic institutions may be eroded. Therefore, what emerges is a governance system in which local governments function as embedded nodes within a wider political settlement dominated by elite interests (Tidemand, 2010). Consistent with the political economy and elite capture framework adopted in this study, these findings suggest that formal decentralisation reforms are unlikely to produce meaningful local autonomy unless the underlying political incentives and institutional mechanisms that sustain elite dominance are fundamentally reconfigured. This confirms the central argument of the study: decentralisation, in the absence of effective safeguards against elite capture and structural dependence, reproduces rather than resolves existing power asymmetries.

Implications for Governance and Citizen Engagement

The combined effect of fiscal centralisation, administrative interference, and entrenched patronage networks has significant implications for governance performance and citizen engagement at the local level in Nigeria. Cumulatively, these mechanisms not only constrain the autonomy of local governments but also reshape the nature of governance itself, shifting it away from participatory and accountable administration towards a more hierarchical and elite-driven system. One of the most direct implications is the weakening of service delivery capacity at the grassroots level. Local governments, constrained by limited fiscal discretion and administrative dependence on higher tiers of government, are often unable to effectively plan or implement development projects that reflect local priorities. This results in a persistent gap between citizen expectations and actual service delivery outcomes, particularly in critical sectors such as primary healthcare, rural infrastructure, and basic education (Fred & Eneiga, 2022). Over time, this gap erodes public confidence in local institutions and reinforces perceptions of government inefficiency. From a political economy perspective, these governance failures are not merely administrative shortcomings but the predictable consequences of institutional arrangements that prioritise political control over local responsiveness.

Closely related to this is the deterioration of downward accountability. In theory, decentralisation is expected to strengthen accountability by bringing decision-making closer to citizens. However, in the Nigerian context, accountability relationships are frequently redirected upwards towards state-level actors who control financial flows and political survival (Ikeanyibe, 2016). Local officials are therefore more incentivised to respond to the expectations of elite actors than to the needs of local populations. This upward accountability structure undermines the democratic potential of decentralisation and weakens the link between citizens and their local representatives. Consistent with the elite capture framework adopted in this study, the concentration of political influence within elite networks reduces opportunities for citizens to shape local priorities or hold elected officials accountable for governance outcomes. Citizen engagement is further constrained by the nature of political inclusion within decentralised structures. While formal institutions for participation may exist, their effectiveness is limited by the dominance of patronage networks that mediate access to resources and influence. In such contexts, participation is often conditional and instrumental, shaped by clientelist relationships rather than open and inclusive deliberation (Rigon, 2014). This reduces citizen engagement to transactional interactions, rather than sustained involvement in governance processes.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is the gradual depoliticisation of local governance in substantive terms, even where formal democratic structures are present. Local governments continue to exist as elected institutions, yet their capacity to function as arenas of meaningful political participation is significantly weakened. This disconnect between formal institutional design and lived governance experience reinforces the central paradox of decentralisation without autonomy. Ultimately, the Nigerian case illustrates that decentralisation, when embedded within systems of elite control and institutional dependency, may fail to generate the expected democratic dividends (Eaton et al., 2010). Instead, it can produce governance arrangements in which citizen engagement is constrained, accountability is distorted, and local institutions operate primarily as extensions of higher-level political authority. These findings suggest that reforms focused solely on constitutional or fiscal restructuring are unlikely to achieve meaningful decentralisation unless they are accompanied by institutional safeguards that reduce opportunities for elite capture, strengthen local accountability, and protect the political and administrative autonomy of local governments. This has important implications for how decentralisation reforms are designed and evaluated, particularly in contexts where informal power structures remain deeply entrenched.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the paradox of decentralisation without autonomy in Nigeria by analysing how federal- and state-level elites constrain the effective functioning of local governments. Drawing on a political economy approach, the analysis has demonstrated that the formal architecture of decentralisation does not necessarily translate into substantive local autonomy, particularly in contexts where power relations remain highly centralised and elite-driven. The findings suggest that the Nigerian local government system is shaped by a combination of mutually reinforcing mechanisms of control. Fiscal centralisation, particularly through the State Joint Local Government Account, limits the financial independence of local governments and constrains their capacity for autonomous planning and implementation. Administrative interference further weakens institutional stability by undermining electoral accountability and subjecting local governance structures to state-level political discretion. In addition, patronage networks and elite capture embed these structural constraints within broader systems of political bargaining, ensuring that decentralised institutions remain aligned with the interests of dominant actors. While state governments constitute the principal actors through which these mechanisms operate, the analysis also demonstrates that federal institutions contribute to this governance architecture through constitutional design, intergovernmental fiscal arrangements, and the broader institutional framework governing state-local relations.

Therefore, these dynamics reveal that decentralisation in Nigeria operates less as a process of genuine devolution and more as a reconfiguration of control. Rather than dispersing authority, it redistributes it in ways that preserve existing hierarchies of power. As a result, local governments function primarily as dependent administrative units within a broader political settlement dominated by elite interests, rather than as autonomous centres of democratic governance. This study contributes to contemporary debates in decentralisation, political economy, and public administration by demonstrating that the effectiveness of decentralisation depends not simply on the formal transfer of authority but on the political and institutional mechanisms through which authority is exercised, negotiated, and constrained. By integrating political economy and elite capture perspectives, the study advances a mechanism-based explanation of why formal decentralisation may coexist with enduring patterns of centralised political control**.** In doing so, it underscores the limitations of approaches that treat decentralisation as inherently democratising without sufficient consideration of the political and institutional contexts within which it is implemented.

The Nigerian case highlights the importance of situating decentralisation reforms within broader structures of power and governance. Without addressing the fiscal, administrative, and political mechanisms that sustain elite control, decentralisation is unlikely to produce meaningful improvements in accountability, service delivery, or citizen engagement. Instead, it risks reproducing the very governance challenges it is intended to resolve. Consequently, the study reinforces the argument that decentralisation must be understood not as a technical reform, but as a deeply political process shaped by competing interests and power asymmetries. Recognising this reality is essential for both scholars and policymakers seeking to design governance systems that are genuinely responsive and inclusive. From a governance perspective, strengthening local government autonomy requires reforms that extend beyond constitutional recognition. Priority should be given to the effective implementation of direct statutory allocations to local governments, strengthening the independence and credibility of local government elections, limiting the prolonged use of caretaker committees, improving transparency in intergovernmental fiscal relations, and reinforcing institutional safeguards that reduce opportunities for political interference and elite capture.

Beyond the Nigerian context, these findings also carry broader implications for decentralisation reforms across the Global South, where similar tensions between formal institutional design and informal power structures persist. This study is, however, subject to certain limitations. The analysis relies exclusively on secondary data and therefore does not capture the perspectives of public officials, political actors, or citizens directly involved in local governance. Although the triangulation of constitutional provisions, policy documents, government reports, and empirical studies enhances the credibility of the findings, the absence of primary data limits the ability to examine variations in elite behaviour and implementation practices across different states. Future research could build on this study by combining documentary analysis with interviews, case studies, or comparative subnational research to examine how political incentives, institutional arrangements, and recent reforms, including the implementation of the July 11, 2024 Supreme Court judgment on local government autonomy, shape governance outcomes across different Nigerian states. Such an inquiry would deepen understanding of the conditions under which decentralisation can move beyond formal institutional arrangements to achieve meaningful local autonomy and democratic governance.

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