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Democracy, Corruption, and Economic Decline in Nigeria: Evaluating Civilian Administration Since 2015

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: democracy, corruption, economic decline, public choice theory, Nigeria ***DOI:*** 10.63280/jpsd.v2i2.50998	*This study examined the relationship between democracy, corruption, and economic decline in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on civilian administrations since 2015. It is anchored on Public Choice Theory, which explains political behaviour as being driven primarily by self-interest rather than collective welfare. The study adopted a qualitative approach, using a historical research design and content analysis of relevant academic literature, policy documents, and documentary evidence. Findings reveal that although Nigeria has maintained democratic governance since 2015, expected developmental outcomes have been constrained by persistent corruption and weak institutional frameworks. Corruption remains deeply embedded in public administration, manifesting through mismanagement of public resources, weak accountability systems, and political patronage. These challenges have significantly contributed to economic decline, reflected in rising unemployment, inflation, deteriorating infrastructure, and increasing public debt. The study further shows that civilian administrations have struggled to translate democratic governance into meaningful economic development due to policy inconsistency and institutional inefficiency. The study concludes that democracy in Nigeria has not delivered optimal economic outcomes due to entrenched corruption and governance weaknesses, in line with the propositions of Public Choice Theory. It recommends, among others, that anti-corruption institutions in Nigeria be strengthened through enhanced operational independence, adequate funding, and the strict enforcement of accountability mechanisms. This will help to reduce political interference, improve institutional effectiveness, and promote transparency in public administration.*

Introduction

Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, the country has widely been described as a democratic state undergoing gradual political consolidation. The transition from prolonged military rule raised expectations that democratic governance would strengthen institutions, enhance accountability, and deliver inclusive economic development. However, more than two decades into the Fourth Republic, and particularly since 2015, these expectations have increasingly come under strain. The period since 2015 has been marked by intensified concerns over democratic backsliding, persistent corruption, fiscal instability, and worsening socio-economic conditions, all of which have reshaped scholarly debates on the effectiveness of Nigeria's civilian administrations.

Empirical indicators reflect these governance and economic challenges. Nigeria entered recession in 2016, with GDP contracting by approximately -1.6%, and experienced another downturn in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although modest recovery followed, growth has remained insufficient to match population expansion, resulting in declining per capita income and deepening poverty. By 2023–2024, inflation had surged into double digits, while unemployment—particularly among youth—remained persistently high, exceeding 30% in many estimates. At the same time, public debt expanded rapidly, with Nigeria's debt-to-GDP ratio rising above 40%, and debt servicing consuming a disproportionate share of national revenue, thereby constraining capital investment in infrastructure, health, and education (World Bank, 2024; IMF, 2025; UNDP, 2023). These indicators highlight a structural contradiction: democratic governance has expanded politically, but economic performance and welfare outcomes have deteriorated.

In principle, democracy is expected to provide a framework for inclusive governance, participatory decision-making, and accountable leadership. However, democratic consolidation in Nigeria has remained fragile due to persistent electoral irregularities, elite dominance of political competition, and weak institutional enforcement mechanisms. Electoral processes continue to be characterized by vote-buying, litigation, and periodic disputes over credibility, while political parties often function as elite bargaining platforms rather than ideological or developmental institutions. As observed by Adagbabiri and Okolie (2017), liberal democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is continuously undermined by credibility challenges, political exclusion, and institutional weaknesses that limit effective governance. These structural constraints have significantly shaped the performance of civilian administrations since 2015, particularly in their capacity to implement coherent development policies.

Corruption remains one of the most persistent and destabilizing barriers to democratic consolidation and economic progress in Nigeria. It undermines public resource allocation, weakens bureaucratic efficiency, distorts policy implementation, and diverts scarce national revenue away from critical development priorities. Adagbabiri and Okolie (2016) emphasize that corruption has had a direct and negative effect on national development in Nigeria's Fourth Republic by reducing governance effectiveness and slowing economic growth. Despite the establishment of institutional frameworks such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), corruption persists due to entrenched patronage networks, weak judicial enforcement, and political interference in accountability processes (Okolie & Egbon, 2025).

A major example of systemic corruption and fiscal inefficiency is the long-standing fuel subsidy regime, which has been widely criticized for enabling large-scale rent-seeking and fraudulent claims. Reports indicate that billions of dollars were lost annually through subsidy-related corruption, prompting partial subsidy removal in 2023 as part of fiscal reform efforts. Similarly, controversies surrounding the rehabilitation of Nigeria's refineries, particularly delayed and over-inflated contract costs, further illustrate how corruption intersects with governance failure and economic stagnation. These inefficiencies have constrained Nigeria's ability to diversify its economy and invest in productive sectors.

Beyond its economic consequences, corruption in Nigeria has profound implications for state legitimacy and national security. Increasingly, governance failure and elite predation have weakened citizens' trust in state institutions, contributing to perceptions of exclusion and injustice. This erosion of legitimacy has been linked to rising insecurity across multiple regions of the country. In the Northeast, insurgency linked to Boko Haram persists; in the Northwest, armed banditry has escalated; and in the Southeast, separatist agitation associated with groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has intensified. Scholars argue that these security challenges are not merely criminal in nature but are deeply rooted in governance deficits, economic exclusion, and perceived corruption within state institutions (International Crisis Group, 2022; OECD, 2023; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). High youth unemployment, estimated at over 30%, further exacerbates these dynamics by expanding the pool of marginalized individuals vulnerable to recruitment into violent or criminal networks.

Furthermore, governance and policy formulation challenges have significantly deepened Nigeria's economic difficulties. Policy processes are often characterized by inconsistency, short-term political calculations, and weak implementation frameworks. Successive administrations have introduced reforms in key sectors such as petroleum pricing, power generation, and anti-corruption enforcement, yet these reforms frequently suffer from poor execution or policy reversals. This lack of continuity undermines investor confidence and weakens long-term development planning. As noted by Okolie and Bisina (2026), policy agenda-setting in Nigeria is often politically driven rather than development-oriented, resulting in ineffective governance outcomes. Similarly, Nigeria's struggle for economic self-reliance is reinforced by structural dependency on oil revenue, weak industrial capacity, and inadequate institutional coordination (Okolie & Ogheneakpoje, 2021).

Civil society participation and party politics, which are central to democratic accountability, also face significant structural limitations. While civil society organizations have historically played roles in electoral advocacy, anti-corruption campaigns, and governance monitoring, their effectiveness is constrained by shrinking civic space, limited funding, and political repression. In addition, political parties remain highly personalized and elite-controlled, with internal democracy often undermined by godfatherism and patronage politics. These weaknesses reduce the capacity of civil society and opposition forces to effectively check government excesses or demand accountability (Adagbabiri & Okolie, 2015).

Against this background, this study examines the relationship between democracy, corruption, and economic decline in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on civilian administrations since 2015. It critically evaluates how democratic governance practices have influenced corruption dynamics, weakened institutional performance, and contributed to worsening economic outcomes. The study further situates these issues within broader concerns of declining state legitimacy, rising insecurity, and growing public distrust in democratic institutions. By integrating political economy analysis with governance and security perspectives, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how democratic governance in Nigeria has interacted with corruption and economic decline in the contemporary era.

Central Research Problem

Despite Nigeria's return to civilian democratic rule in 1999, and particularly since 2015, the anticipated democratic dividends—improved governance, reduced corruption, macroeconomic stability, and enhanced citizen welfare-have not been realized. Instead, the period has been characterized by persistent corruption, weak institutional performance, inconsistent policy implementation, rising insecurity, and worsening socio-economic conditions, including economic recession, high inflation, elevated unemployment, and increasing public debt burdens.

This situation reveals a persistent governance paradox: although democratic institutions have been formally sustained and, in some respects, expanded, their capacity to ensure accountability, promote economic development, and strengthen state legitimacy has remained limited. The continued dominance of elite-driven politics, institutional fragility, and systemic corruption suggest that

Nigeria's democratic governance may be structurally constrained in ways that undermine its developmental outcomes. However, the specific ways in which democratic practices interact with corruption and economic decline—particularly within civilian administrations since 2015—remain insufficiently understood and analytically underexplored.

Central Analytical Question

To what extent has democratic governance under Nigeria's civilian administrations since 2015 shaped the persistence of corruption and contributed to economic decline, and through what institutional, political, and governance mechanisms do these processes operate?

Review of Related Literature

Democracy is widely regarded as a governance system that promotes accountability, inclusiveness, political participation, institutional stability, and rule-based decision-making. In theory, it is expected to strengthen state legitimacy, reduce arbitrary rule, and foster sustainable socio-economic development. However, Nigeria's democratic experience since the return to civilian rule in 1999 reveals persistent contradictions between these normative expectations and the realities of governance performance.

Empirically, Nigeria's democratic trajectory has been marked by weak governance outcomes across key institutional indicators. The World Bank's governance indicators consistently reflect low performance in government effectiveness, rule of law, political stability, and control of corruption, suggesting persistent institutional fragility. Similarly, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index continues to rank Nigeria poorly, reflecting entrenched corruption perceptions within the public sector, while Freedom House repeatedly classifies Nigeria as "partly free," citing electoral irregularities, weak accountability systems, and restrictions on political rights (Freedom House, 2024; Transparency International, 2024). In addition, Afrobarometer survey data indicate declining public trust in democratic institutions, with widespread dissatisfaction regarding government responsiveness, service delivery, and accountability. These governance indicators collectively demonstrate that although democratic institutions formally exist, their functional capacity to deliver development and accountability remains constrained.

Within scholarly debates, Nigeria's democracy is often interpreted through the lens of prebendal politics, where access to state power is primarily used for private accumulation and patronage distribution rather than public service delivery (Joseph, 1987). This pattern has entrenched elite domination of political processes and weakened institutional accountability mechanisms. Similarly, Lewis (2006) argues that Nigeria's democracy is sustained less by institutional consolidation and more by elite bargaining arrangements, where political stability is maintained through negotiated power-sharing among dominant groups rather than through strong programmatic institutions. This has produced a fragile democratic system in which institutions are often subordinated to elite interests.

Comparatively, Nigeria's democratic experience aligns with broader debates on democratization in developing countries, particularly in resource-dependent and post-authoritarian states. In many such contexts, electoral democracy coexists with weak institutions, high inequality, and elite capture of state structures. This reflects the broader literature on hybrid regimes and constrained democracies, where formal democratic procedures exist but substantive accountability remains limited due to entrenched elite networks and weak institutional enforcement. Nigeria's experience therefore reflects a wider pattern in which democracy is maintained procedurally while remaining limited in its developmental and redistributive outcomes.

Since 2015, these structural weaknesses have become more visible due to increasing electoral disputes, institutional fragility, and governance inefficiencies. Electoral processes continue to be characterized by vote-buying, litigation, and periodic disputes over credibility, which undermine public confidence in democratic governance. Adagbabiri and Okolie (2017) note that liberal democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic suffers from credibility deficits and institutional constraints that limit its capacity to deliver good governance and development outcomes. However, beyond institutional weakness alone, democracy is also constrained by political settlement dynamics that prioritize elite survival over public welfare (Kelsall, 2018), thereby reinforcing inequality, limiting reform capacity, and weakening the developmental impact of democratic governance.

Political Instability and Institutional Weakness

Nigeria's federal system was designed to promote unity and stability, yet it has struggled with weak intergovernmental coordination and inefficient institutional relationships. Okolie (2019) argues that poor governance coordination between federal, state, and local governments has weakened public service delivery and contributed to recurring political tensions.

Beyond institutional design, instability is reinforced by elite competition over access to state resources. According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), extractive institutions tend to persist when elites monopolize political and economic power, limiting inclusive development. In Nigeria, this dynamic manifests through weak accountability systems and politicized governance structures.

Furthermore, political practices such as defection and party switching ("cross-carpeting") weaken ideological consistency and undermine democratic consolidation. Okolie (2021) observes that frequent party switching disrupts governance continuity and reinforces elite opportunism, thereby reducing the effectiveness of democratic institutions.

Corruption, Rentierism, and Governance Failure

Corruption remains a central explanatory factor for Nigeria's governance and economic challenges. However, it is more accurately understood within the context of a **r**entier state **structure**, where oil revenue reduces dependence on taxation and weakens accountability between the state and citizens (Mahdavy, 1970; Ross, 2012).

Orhero (2007) explains that corruption increases the cost of governance by diverting public resources into private hands, reducing efficiency in public service delivery. Similarly, Adagbabiri and Okolie (2016) argue that corruption has significantly undermined national development by weakening institutions and distorting public policy outcomes.

Recent governance studies show that corruption in Nigeria is not merely administrative failure but a systemic political survival strategy embedded in elite networks (Transparency International, 2024; World Bank, 2024). This aligns with Rose-Ackerman (1999), who argues that corruption thrives where political and economic institutions are weak and enforcement mechanisms are politicized.

Despite anti-corruption institutions such as the EFCC and ICPC, enforcement remains inconsistent due to political interference, selective prosecution, and institutional dependency (Okolie & Egbon, 2025). This selective enforcement reflects what Johnston (2005) describes as "syndromes of corruption," where corruption is embedded within political systems rather than existing as isolated acts.

Corruption, Insecurity, and State Legitimacy

Recent literature increasingly links corruption not only to economic decline but also to **state legitimacy crises and insecurity**. Weak governance and elite capture reduce public trust in institutions, creating conditions for violent resistance and criminal economies.

Studies show strong linkages between poverty, unemployment, and insecurity. Okolie, Onyema, and Basey (2019) argue that economic deprivation increases vulnerability to crime and social unrest. This aligns with Collier (2007), who notes that low-income, high-inequality societies are more prone to conflict and violence.

Nigeria's insecurity—ranging from Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast to banditry in the Northwest and separatist agitation in the Southeast—reflects deeper governance failures. The International Crisis Group (2022) and Onuoha (2014) emphasize that these conflicts are rooted in weak state legitimacy, poor service delivery, and exclusionary governance.

Ethno-religious conflicts also reinforce fragmentation. Udom and Okolie (2022) note that such conflicts weaken national integration and reduce the capacity of government institutions to maintain stability. More recently, Ufana and Aneji (2025) argue that weak state capacity and governance deficits have directly contributed to escalating insecurity and declining economic productivity.

Public Policy Failure and Elite Capture

Public policy in Nigeria is frequently shaped by elite interests rather than developmental priorities. This reflects what Khan (2010) describes as **political settlement dynamics**, where policy outcomes are determined by powerful coalitions rather than formal institutions.

Okolie and Bisina (2026) argue that policy agenda-setting in Nigeria is often driven by political patronage and elite bargaining, leading to weak implementation and inconsistent policy direction. This results in a persistent gap between policy design and execution, undermining development effectiveness.

This problem is compounded by weak bureaucratic capacity and institutional fragmentation, which limit the ability of government agencies to implement long-term development policies effectively. Consequently, policy instability discourages investment and reinforces economic stagnation.

Anti-Corruption Institutions and Governance Constraints

Anti-corruption institutions in Nigeria face structural and political constraints that limit their effectiveness. While agencies such as EFCC and ICPC exist to enforce accountability, their operations are frequently undermined by political interference and resource limitations.

Okolie and Egbon (2025) argue that these institutions are weakened by elite manipulation and lack of independence. This supports findings by Doig and

Theobald (2013), who emphasize that anti-corruption agencies in developing democracies often fail when political elites control enforcement structures.

Additionally, limited funding, weak judicial backing, and bureaucratic inefficiencies further reduce institutional effectiveness. As a result, anti-corruption efforts often produce symbolic rather than substantive outcomes, allowing corruption to persist within public administration systems.

Civilian Administration Since 2015 and Economic Decline

Civilian administrations since 2015 have struggled to translate democratic governance into economic development. Despite democratic consolidation, Nigeria has experienced rising poverty, inflation, unemployment, and fiscal instability.

World Bank (2024) and IMF (2025) reports indicate that Nigeria's economic growth has been insufficient to reduce poverty or improve living standards, despite being Africa's largest economy. Structural dependence on oil revenue, weak industrialization, and poor fiscal management continue to constrain economic diversification (African Development Bank, 2023).

Corruption under civilian rule has also reduced public investment efficiency. Adagbabiri and Okolie (2016) argue that corruption directly undermines development outcomes by distorting resource allocation and weakening governance effectiveness.

Furthermore, insecurity has worsened economic decline by discouraging investment and disrupting productive activities (International Crisis Group, 2022). This reinforces the argument that governance failure, corruption, and insecurity are mutually reinforcing.

Critical Analysis: Why Democratic Institutions Fail to Constrain Corruption in Nigeria

Although Nigeria operates a formal democratic system with elections, constitutional checks, and anti-corruption agencies, these institutions have remained largely ineffective in constraining corruption. This failure is not due to the absence of institutions, but rather the political and structural conditions that weaken their autonomy, enforcement capacity, and credibility.

A central explanation lies in Nigeria's political settlement, where access to state power is the primary route to wealth accumulation and elite survival. In such a context, democratic institutions are embedded within a patronage system rather than operating as neutral rule-enforcing bodies. As Kelsall (2018) argues, political settlements in many developing democracies are designed to preserve elite bargains rather than enforce accountability, meaning anti-corruption rules are selectively applied depending on elite interests. This undermines institutional independence and allows corruption to persist as a political survival strategy rather than an aberration.

In addition, prebendal political structures reinforce the personalization of public office. As Joseph (1987) explains, political office in Nigeria is often treated as an entitlement through which officials distribute state resources to networks of supporters. This weakens bureaucratic neutrality and transforms democratic competition into a struggle for access to state resources. In such a system, corruption is not simply illegal behaviour but is embedded in the logic of political competition itself, making institutional control mechanisms structurally constrained.

Institutional weakness is also reinforced by elite control over enforcement agencies. Although bodies such as the EFCC and ICPC exist, their operational independence is frequently undermined by executive interference, selective prosecution, and politicization of investigations. Adagbabiri and Okolie (2016) and Okolie and Egbon (2025) emphasize that corruption persists partly because accountability institutions are not insulated from political influence. This creates what Rose-Ackerman (1999) describes as "weak enforcement environments," where anti-corruption rules exist but are inconsistently applied, reducing deterrence.

Furthermore, democratic institutions in Nigeria are weakened by electoral incentives that reward political patronage rather than accountability. Electoral competition is often expensive and heavily monetized, encouraging candidates to rely on illicit resource mobilization to finance campaigns and reward supporters. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which corruption becomes necessary for political survival, while elected officials face limited incentives to strengthen institutions that could later constrain them.

Economic structure also plays a critical role. As a rentier state dependent on oil revenues, Nigeria experiences weakened fiscal accountability between the state and citizens (Ross, 2012; Mahdavy, 1970). Because government revenue is not strongly derived from taxation, citizens have limited leverage over public spending decisions, reducing pressure for transparency and accountability. This weak fiscal social contract reduces the effectiveness of democratic oversight institutions.

Additionally, the weak rule of law and judicial inefficiencies further undermine institutional constraints on corruption. Delays in prosecution, limited conviction rates, and procedural bottlenecks reduce the deterrent effect of anti-corruption enforcement. Even when investigations are initiated, outcomes are often influenced by political negotiations, reinforcing perceptions of impunity and selective justice.

Comparatively, Nigeria reflects broader patterns observed in hybrid and developing democracies, where formal democratic institutions coexist with informal networks of patronage and elite capture. As Levitsky and Way (2010) argue in the context of competitive authoritarian systems, democratic institutions may exist on paper but fail in practice when ruling elites manipulate rules to maintain dominance. Similarly, empirical governance literature shows that corruption persists in contexts where institutions are not insulated from political interference and where elite coalitions benefit from weak enforcement structures (Transparency International, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

In sum, democratic institutions in Nigeria fail to constrain corruption not because they are absent, but because they are structurally embedded in a political system characterized by elite bargaining, rent dependence, weak enforcement autonomy, and electoral patronage incentives. This produces a situation in which corruption is not external to democracy but is often reproduced within its institutional functioning.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Public Choice Theory, which was systematically developed by Buchanan and Tullock (1962) in *The Calculus of Consent*. The theory applies economic reasoning to political behaviour, assuming that political actors act in their own self-interest rather than the public interest.

Public Choice Theory posits that politicians, bureaucrats, and voters behave rationally to maximize personal utility. As a result, policy outcomes often reflect self-interest, rent-seeking, and strategic behaviour rather than collective welfare.

In the Nigerian context, this theory provides a strong explanatory framework for persistent corruption and governance failure. Political elites often use state resources for patronage and personal enrichment, consistent with Orhero (2007), who argues that corruption increases governance costs and reduces institutional efficiency.

Similarly, Okolie and Egbon (2025) demonstrate that anti-corruption institutions are frequently weakened by political interference, reinforcing self-interested behaviour within the political system. This aligns with Rose-Ackerman (1999), who argues that corruption persists where incentives for accountability are weak and enforcement is politically constrained. Overall, Public Choice Theory explains Nigeria’s post-2015 governance outcomes as rational but self-interested decisions by political actors operating within weak institutional constraints, leading to corruption, policy failure, and economic decline.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative desk-based research design, drawing primarily on documentary evidence and scholarly literature to examine the relationship between democracy, corruption, and economic decline in Nigeria. Although earlier described as a historical research design, the study more accurately fits within a qualitative interpretive and literature-based synthesis approach, as it does not involve archival excavation, structured periodization, or primary historical reconstruction typical of classical historical research (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The choice of this design is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of existing knowledge, policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly debates on governance and Public Choice Theory, particularly within the Nigerian context since 2015. The approach is suitable for exploring complex political and institutional phenomena where quantitative measurement alone may not sufficiently capture underlying structural dynamics such as corruption, elite behaviour, and governance failure.

Data Sources

Data for this study were derived exclusively from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and institutional publications from organizations such as the World Bank, IMF, Transparency International, and UNDP. These sources were selected based on their relevance to democracy, governance, corruption, and economic performance in Nigeria.

Rather than claiming the use of primary archival materials, this study acknowledges that such sources were not directly analyzed, and any reference to official documents, speeches, or government publications is strictly interpretive through existing scholarly works. This clarification addresses a common methodological limitation in desk-based political science studies where secondary interpretation is often mistaken for primary historical analysis (Scott, 1990).

Data Collection and Selection Criteria

The selection of literature followed a purposive approach, focusing on materials that:

1. Address democracy, corruption, governance, and economic performance in Nigeria;

2. Are published in credible peer-reviewed journals or by recognized international institutions;
3. Fall within a relevant temporal focus, particularly post-2015 governance developments, while also incorporating foundational theoretical works.

However, it is important to note that no formal systematic review protocol (such as PRISMA or database-driven search algorithms) was employed. This represents a limitation of the study, as source selection is interpretive and may be influenced by availability bias and authorial judgment (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016).

Data Analysis Method

The study employs thematic content analysis as its analytical framework. Content analysis, as a qualitative technique, involves identifying, categorizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within textual data (Krippendorff, 2013).

The analysis proceeded through the following stages:

1. Familiarization with collected literature and policy documents;
2. Identification of recurring themes such as corruption, institutional weakness, elite capture, and policy failure;
3. Categorization of these themes in relation to the study objectives;
4. Interpretation of patterns using Public Choice Theory as the analytical lens;
5. Synthesis of findings to establish linkages between governance behaviour and economic outcomes.

However, unlike fully systematic qualitative methodologies, the coding process in this study was not software-assisted (e.g., NVivo) and did not follow formal inter-coder reliability testing. This limits replicability and introduces potential subjectivity in thematic interpretation (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Limitations of the Methodology

This study acknowledges several methodological limitations:

First, the research is primarily a qualitative synthesis rather than empirical fieldwork or archival historical analysis, which limits causal inference and generalizability. Second, reliance on secondary data introduces the risk of interpretive bias, as findings depend on the accuracy and framing of existing literature. Third, the absence of a systematic review protocol limits transparency in source selection and may introduce selection bias.

Finally, the study does not include a reflexive analysis of researcher positionality, which is increasingly recognized as important in qualitative political research for enhancing transparency and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Despite these limitations, the approach remains appropriate for generating conceptual and theoretical insights into the structural relationship between democracy, corruption, and economic decline in Nigeria.

Findings

This study investigated the relationship between democracy, corruption, and economic decline in Nigeria, with a specific focus on civilian administrations since 2015. Based on an extensive review of scholarly literature, institutional reports, and policy documents, the findings indicate that Nigeria's democratic governance during this period has been characterized not merely by institutional continuity but by persistent structural governance weaknesses that have constrained developmental outcomes.

First, the findings show that while democratic institutions such as elections, the legislature, and executive governance structures remain formally functional, their substantive effectiveness has been significantly weakened by entrenched patterns of elite dominance and patronage politics. Across the Buhari administration (2015–2023) and the early phase of the Tinubu administration (2023–present), governance has continued to reflect strong executive control over key institutions, with limited autonomy for accountability agencies. This continuity suggests that democratic practice in Nigeria is better understood as elite-managed electoral democracy rather than a fully institutionalized liberal democracy.

Second, the study finds that corruption is not episodic but systemic, embedded within the structure of state–society relations. It manifests through procurement inflation, subsidy-related rent extraction, politically influenced contract awards, and weak enforcement of public financial accountability. For example, long-standing inefficiencies in the fuel subsidy regime and continued controversies around state-owned enterprises such as the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPCL) illustrate how state resources are frequently captured through informal networks of political and bureaucratic elites. These patterns align with rentier state dynamics, where access to oil revenue reduces fiscal accountability and strengthens distributive patronage systems.

Third, the findings indicate that economic decline since 2015 is closely linked to governance inefficiencies rather than purely external shocks. Although Nigeria experienced global pressures such as COVID-19 disruptions and fluctuating oil prices, domestic structural constraints have played a more decisive role. Key indicators—including rising inflation, persistent unemployment (particularly among youth), declining real incomes, and increasing debt servicing obligations—reflect weak macroeconomic management and limited productive diversification. The deterioration of public infrastructure, especially in electricity supply and transportation, further constrains private sector growth and reinforces economic stagnation.

However, a more nuanced finding is that economic outcomes have not been uniform across administrations. The Buhari era (2015–2023) was characterized by recessionary pressures (notably in 2016 and 2020), foreign exchange restrictions, and heavy security expenditure due to insurgency. In contrast, the early Tinubu administration has focused on subsidy removal and exchange rate unification reforms, which have generated short-term inflationary pressures while aiming for long-term fiscal stabilization. This indicates that while policy direction differs, both administrations face structural constraints rooted in Nigeria's political economy rather than administrative preference alone.

Fourth, the study finds that weak institutional enforcement significantly limits the effectiveness of anti-corruption mechanisms. Agencies such as the EFCC and ICPC operate within politically constrained environments where enforcement is often selective and subject to elite negotiation. This reduces deterrence capacity and reinforces perceptions of impunity. Furthermore, judicial delays and limited prosecutorial independence weaken accountability outcomes, making institutional reform largely symbolic rather than transformative.

Fifth, the findings highlight a strong linkage between governance failure, inequality, and insecurity. Rising poverty levels, youth unemployment, and regional disparities in development have contributed to increased vulnerability to violence and social unrest. The persistence of insurgency in the Northeast, banditry in the Northwest, and separatist agitation in the Southeast reflects deeper structural grievances linked to state legitimacy deficits. Rather than being purely security-driven phenomena, these conflicts are embedded in long-standing patterns of exclusion, elite accumulation, and uneven development.

Sixth, the study finds that Nigeria's governance challenges are also shaped by external political economy influences, including dependence on international financial institutions and exposure to global oil market volatility. Policy reforms promoted by institutions such as the IMF and World Bank have influenced fiscal restructuring efforts, but their implementation has often been constrained by domestic political resistance and weak administrative capacity. Additionally, illicit financial flows and capital flight further weaken the state's ability to mobilize domestic resources for development.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that while democracy in Nigeria has been sustained since 2015 in formal institutional terms, its developmental impact remains significantly constrained. This constraint is driven by the interaction of systemic corruption, weak institutional autonomy, rentier-state dynamics, and elite capture of state resources. Consequently, rather than producing broad-based development outcomes, Nigeria's democratic governance has largely reproduced patterns of economic inequality, institutional fragility, and limited improvement in citizen welfare.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the relationship between democracy, corruption, and economic decline in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on civilian administrations since 2015. The analysis shows that although democratic governance has been sustained within the period under review, its developmental impact has remained limited. This gap between democratic continuity and weak socio-economic outcomes is largely explained by persistent corruption, elite capture of state institutions, and weak enforcement of governance rules.

The evidence reviewed indicates that corruption is not incidental but structurally embedded within Nigeria's governance system. It manifests through politically driven allocation of public resources, weak budgetary oversight, procurement distortions, and entrenched patronage networks. These patterns have significantly undermined economic performance, contributing to rising unemployment, persistent inflation, declining real incomes, widening infrastructure gaps, and increasing public debt burdens. Rather than acting as a mechanism for public welfare delivery, state institutions often function as arenas for elite competition over scarce resources.

In conclusion, the study finds that democracy in Nigeria since 2015 has not translated into meaningful economic development due to the interaction of systemic corruption and weak institutional governance. These constraints have reduced policy effectiveness, weakened accountability mechanisms, and eroded public trust in democratic institutions. Consequently, Nigeria's democratic system has largely reproduced rather than resolved long-standing structural challenges of underdevelopment and inequality. While acknowledging the structural nature of these challenges, the study proposes the following pragmatic and institutionally grounded recommendations, informed by both Public Choice Theory and governance reform literature:

First, anti-corruption institutions such as the EFCC and ICPC should be strengthened through legally guaranteed operational independence, improved funding structures tied to constitutional or statutory allocations, and transparent appointment processes insulated from partisan control. However, recognizing political resistance to reform, such strengthening should be phased and supported by enforceable oversight mechanisms such as parliamentary audit committees and judicial review systems.

Second, institutional reforms should go beyond administrative efficiency to address incentive structures that sustain corruption. This includes expanding digital governance systems (e-governance platforms) to reduce human discretion in procurement, revenue collection, and service delivery. Additionally, merit-based recruitment and promotion systems should be enforced across public institutions to reduce patronage-driven appointments that weaken bureaucratic professionalism.

Third, in line with Public Choice Theory (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962), governance reforms should focus on designing **rules and constraints** that limit self-interested political behaviour**,** rather than relying solely on ethical appeals. Such institutional safeguards may include stronger fiscal responsibility laws, binding transparency requirements for public expenditure, and enforceable conflict-of-interest regulations for public officials.

Fourth, broader structural reforms are required to improve accountability and reduce elite capture. These include strengthening judicial independence to ensure timely prosecution of corruption cases, reforming campaign finance regulations to reduce money-driven politics, and enhancing legislative oversight of executive spending. Without addressing these deeper political incentives, anti-corruption efforts are likely to remain symbolic.

Fifth, citizen participation should be strengthened through institutionalized mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, expanded access to public information, and stronger protection for civil society organizations and investigative journalism. However, such participation must be backed by legal protections to prevent political intimidation and civic space restriction.

Finally, the government should promote policy consistency by strengthening long-term national development planning frameworks that are insulated from electoral cycles. This will help reduce policy volatility, improve investor confidence, and ensure continuity in key development sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and human capital development.

Overall, these recommendations emphasize that addressing corruption and economic decline in Nigeria requires not only institutional strengthening but also a redesign of political incentives that currently encourage rent-seeking and weak accountability.

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