

Democracy Without Development: Leadership Failure and Nigeria's Democratic Paradox

Abstract

Nigeria's stalled development presents a daunting challenge for its democratic trajectory, especially when viewed from the angle of leadership. Decades after the restoration of civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria still grapples with underdevelopment as evidenced by endemic corruption, lack of institutional capacity, lack of accountability, and lack of visionary leadership. This study examines the nexus between democratic institutions and developmental performance as mediated by the quality of leadership. It adopts a qualitative research design that relies on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, archives, credible media and internet sources. The study argues that the cycle of elite capture, institutional weakness, and government inefficiencies impede democratic consolidation and national development in Nigeria. The findings show that democracy in Nigeria is more procedural and characterized by the ceremonial practice of elections, without necessarily translating into substantive governance and developmental benefits. The weaknesses of leadership plagued by patrimonialism, corruption, and policy inconsistency have caused a lack of trust in the government, political apathy, and elite domination. The study concludes that sustainable democratic consolidation requires a change in leadership, which is enhanced by institutional change, transparency, citizen involvement, and policy-based development. Accordingly, strengthening democratic institutions and developing leadership are inseparable from the process of realizing electoral democracy into practical socioeconomic development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, governance, institution, leadership, Nigeria, underdevelopment.

Introduction

Democracy without development is a bane to post-colonial politics in Nigeria. The country is presently experiencing the longest period of continuous democratic governance in its history since the Fourth Republic was restored in 1999. However, Nigeria still grapples with deep-seated governance inefficiency, wanton corruption, institutional weakness, and widespread poverty. These paradoxical occurrences call to question the effectiveness of electoral democracy and whether the survival of democratic institutions has brought about significant socioeconomic growth, or whether it further the status quo of elite domination (Moliki et al., 2025). The Nigerian case highlights the multi-dimensional nature of procedures democracy translating into substantive outcomes of development, especially where leadership is challenged. Meanwhile, this paradox is evident in empirical literature. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, 63 (133 million of 200 million) percent of Nigerians live in multidimensional poverty, and the unemployment rate among the youth also has not increased essentially in 33 (NBS, 2022). Simultaneously, Nigeria is categorized as a low human development country having ranked 161 out of 189 countries in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI) at 0.548, attributable to inequality, poverty, gender disparity, low life expectancy and low-income levels after twenty years of democratic leadership (United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, 2024). In addition, Transparency International (2024) placed Nigeria as one of the most corrupt nations in the world, with a Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) rating of 26/100, thus indicating profound elite capture and mismanagement of resources. These empirical facts provide a vivid example of how democracy, without accountable and ethical leaders, can reassert itself amid a high socioeconomic stagnation.

A study of the Nigerian democratic process shows that there is a consistent pattern of institutional weakness and elite controlled politics which destroys development in a systematic way (Akinyetun & Ebonine, 2023). The elections in Nigeria have been regular since the country returned to civilian rule in 1999; however, there has been poor democratic consolidation. Political patronage, elite capture, and rent-seeking behaviour are common in manipulating state institutions, including the judiciary, electoral commission, and anti-corruption agencies, which sets up structural limits that stem out transformative governance (Vincent et al., 2025). According to Ake (1996), the post-colonial African state, specifically Nigeria, was historically less a means through which societal development could be achieved and rather a site of accumulation of elite and political domination. The current trends in Nigerian political practices support this claim: instead of being a service or transformation of the nation, politics is mostly a struggle to have access to state resources.

The expectations and hope that greeted the Fourth Republic concerning institutional strengthening, accountability, and socioeconomic growth remain unfulfilled more than 20 years later. The lack of trust in democratic institutions has been weakened by persistent leadership failures, corruption, inconsistency of policies, and impunity of the elites (Centre for Public Sector Governance, CPSG, 2025). Democracy in Nigeria is viewed as a hybrid regime, in which formal electoralism is present, but the governing institutions fail to deliver transparency, social justice or any real developmental results. Similarly, Nigeria has been described as an illiberal democracy, which implies that the country is procedurally compliant with elections but fails in terms of governance performance (Norwegian Digital Learning Arena, 2025).

Meanwhile, the question of leadership is at the core of Nigeria's lack of democracy. According to Yagboyaju & Akinola (2019), political leadership in Nigeria has been more self-

centred and patrimonial, that is, focused on the interests of the narrow ethnic, regional, or personal interests rather than the national development goals. This culture is reflected in poor institutions, systemic corruption, and a governance culture that condones impunity. The leadership inadequacies engender economic stagnation, unemployment, and structural decay, which renders the country democracy incapable of propelling national development. Leadership quality is a key factor in determining democratic performance in terms of development. Tzeng (2022) argues that inopportune actions, absence of vision, and insensitivity to the needs of citizens make democracy shallow or performative. While there is ceremonial conduct of elections, there is no substantive result for justice, accountability, or service delivery. Nigeria is such an example where despite the existence of a formal government, gains of governance activities are exclusively enjoyed by the political elite, while a majority of the populace languish in socioeconomic poverty.

As a result, this study questions the nexus between democratic failure and political leadership in Nigeria. It hypothesizes that democratic failure is not necessarily the consequence of the fragility of institutions or even the lack of functioning, but that it runs deep in the leadership culture of the political elite. The absence of substantive leadership is a setback for democratic consolidation and socioeconomic development. This study anticipates a relationship between the quality of leadership, democratic performance, and developmental outcomes. It also seeks to drive renewed debate on democracy and development in Africa by explaining the role of Nigerian leadership in its democratic structure. Thus, leadership quality can be viewed as a mediating variable. As long as democratic institutions offer space for participation, accountability, and representation, their ability to promote development is subject to visionary and effective exercise of political power.

Literature Review

Democracy and Development: Insights from Previous Studies

The democratic-development nexus is a central issue in political and development studies and is a point of controversy with respect to the claim that the governance of democratic states is always suited to socioeconomic development. Classical liberal theorists and modern development theorists claim that democracy provides structural and normative conditions that are ideal for development. Egugbo (2024) noted that the effective utilization of democratic concepts, such as participation, accountability, and transparency, can improve the welfare of citizens and, in turn, result in economic growth. Meanwhile, Sen (1999) views development as increasing substantive freedoms and argues that political rights, civic participation, and institutional accountability are preconditions of social and economic development. These views suggest that democracy is more than a procedural system of electoral contests and that it is a systemic formation that can enable its citizens to control and influence inclusive institutions. This perspective is supported by Ko et al. (2025) who recognise the structural benefits of democratic regimes, namely, the freedom of expression, participatory governance, and institutional checks that when pooled together allow the promotion of innovation, policy responsiveness, and socioeconomic growth.

The theoretical standpoint of the subject remains a paradox to Nigeria's empirical reality. The behaviour of successive elections since the restoration of civilian rule in 1999 has not led to any improvements in living standards, infrastructure, or institutional performance (Akinyetun, 2021). Madueke (2025) notes that even though democracy theoretically gives citizens the power to check leaders, democracy in Nigeria has been largely procedural, which is marked by electoral rituals since which there are no substantial governance results. Political patronage, elite capture, and institutional fragility are some of the reasons why

democratic systems have been extremely restricted in creating meaningful development. Such a discrepancy between democratic form and developmental performance reveals the shortcomings of a purely procedural definition of the concept of democracy and highlights the need to consider the intervening factor of the quality of leadership.

The literature shows a sharp gap in comprehension: although it is well-known that there are numerous studies focused on procedural democracy or its theoretical ability to promote development, few question the impact of the quality of leadership on the transfer of the principles of democracy to the developmental results. There are very limited empirical studies that attempt to explain the relationship between elite behaviour, quality governance, and the achievement of development goals in Nigeria. This disparity is especially apposite to post-colonial African nations, where the nexus of structural disparities, historical imprints, and elite control makes the connection between democratic leadership and socio-economic change more difficult.

Nigeria Leadership and Governance

Leadership is one of the most significant factors in governance effectiveness and the development of a country. The literature highlights the fact that the quality of leadership defines how far democratic systems can go in terms of fostering socio-economic progress. Good leadership is the combination of vision, integrity, responsibility, and mobilisation of citizens towards common goals. Seteolu (2004) and Bakare et al. (2019) classify leadership theories into trait, behavioural, charismatic, transformational and visionary paradigms which are used in demonstrating how individual characteristics are controlled by institutional and structural environmental factors to influence delivery of governance. Transformational and visionary leadership are needed to turn the principles of democracy into viable developmental policies and organisational sustainability. Nonetheless, empirical findings suggest that Nigeria experiences a chronic lack of such leadership, which is manifested in the self-interested rule, patronage system, and ethno-regional favouritism (Idowu et al., 2019). This acts as a hindrance to the capacity of democratic institutions, slows down service delivery, and increases socio-economic inequities. Without the presence of leaders with vision and accountability, democratic structures cannot be transformed into physical development projects, and this will continue to maintain poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural shortage. Governance failures and the loss of national trust in state institutions due to the prioritisation of personal enrichment by the political elite at the cost of national welfare complicate the process of governance and destroy democratic legitimacy and consolidation.

The research gap that arises based on this body of research is critical. Although the role of leadership failure has been widely studied, few studies have examined poor leadership interaction with weak democratic institutions to further result in developmental stagnation. Additionally, the theoretical explanations of the failure of leadership, especially in the Elite Theory, are not commonly used to discuss the failure of the application of procedural democratic processes to achieve substantive developmental outcomes in Nigeria.

Bad Leadership and Democratic Erosion

Bad leadership in Nigeria includes corruption, power abuse, electoral fraud, patronage, and institutional subversion. Systemic weaknesses in major democratic institutions like the judiciary, electoral commissions, and anti-corruption agencies are usually prone to elite interference and perpetuate these behaviours (Madueke, 2025). This has resulted in a culture of impunity, clientelism, and normalisation of corruption within governance in Nigeria, which has caused the disillusionment of people, a decrease in voter turnout, and political

apathy (Akinyetun, 2021). Meanwhile, Transparency International (2024) includes Nigeria among the most corrupt nations in the world and shows the extent to which elite capture and resource mismanagement is prevalent. The issue of corruption is not occasional but rather systemic in political leadership within Nigeria, whereby elite networks take advantage of positions in offices to amass wealth at the expense of the people (Nkwede&Emordi, 2018). This structural fact supports a vicious circle of governance failure in which weak institutions allow the domination of the elite, which consequently limits democratic accountability, causes public cynicism, and limits development accomplishments. Although plenty of literature is available on the failures of leadership, studies tend to focus on these phenomena independently, without considering the systemic interaction of elite behaviour, institutional weakness, and development stagnation. Analyses that combine these dimensions are urgently needed so that a comprehensive picture of the situation can be obtained on the topic of democratic erosion in Nigeria.

Nexus of Democracy, Leadership and Development

Democracy, leadership, and development are interdependent issues that are extensively recognized in the political and developmental literature. According to the arguments advanced by Ibiamu (2022), it is democratic institutions that should not be seen as a guarantee of socio-economic transformation, but visionary and accountable leadership that must help in translating democratic norms into practical results. Babalola (2024) observed in Nigeria that political parties and elites often do not have coherent ideologies, as they focus on capturing resources, consolidating power, and patronising them. This elite behaviour undermines the government, institutional corruption, and an equal growth hindrance. Meanwhile, the liberal democratic viewpoint dictates that good governance is based on strong institutional checks and balances, civil liberties, and horizontal accountability to hold leadership accountable in place of the needs of the people (Koliba, 2024). However, in reality, Nigerian democratic institutions have been mostly distorted by the interests of the elites which has created a gap between the formal levels of democracy and the actual levels of development growth. The tendency of electoral rituals to continue even in the absence of significant service delivery is a demonstration of this disconnection, and this would indicate that democracy is needed but not enough to achieve development without able, ethical, and visionary leadership.

An overview of the literature shows that several gaps continue to reoccur. First, that the connection between democracy and development is theorised is not given sufficient attention by researchers, while the role of leadership quality as an intermediary variable in Nigerian experience is under-researched. Second, although a lack of leadership has been widely reported, the relationship between leadership failure and ineffective democratic institutions in replicating development stagnation has not been adequately examined. Third, studies seldom contextualize these dynamics in any logical theoretical context, of which Elite Theory or others can explain the structural limits of concentrated political and economic authority. This study fills these gaps by examining the nexus between quality of leadership, democratic consolidation, and development performance in Nigeria. Using Elite Theory as an analytical tool, this study offers an organised explanation of how elite behaviour impacts governance, weakens institutional capacity, and erodes the welfare of the populace.

Conceptual Framework

Democracy, Leadership, and the Paradox of Democratic Failure in Nigeria

Democracy and leadership are two complementary dimensions of governance, and their interplay has a substantial effect on the outcome of politics, the effectiveness of institutions, and the pattern of development. Democracy offers the institutional form of participation,

representation, and accountability of the citizens and in this way, mechanisms by which societal preferences are aggregated as well as public policies are legitimised are provided (Koliba, 2024). Meanwhile, leadership operationalises these structures by establishing priorities, mobilisation of resources, and transformation of policy intentions into a realisation of socio-economic results. In cases where democratic institutions come into being mainly in the form of formal procedures, but leadership is selfish or predatory, the government becomes ceremonial and not substantive. In this regard, elections can be periodic, but they do not lead to accountability, equitable policy, and sustainable development (Özden, 2023). The Nigerian case is illustrative of this paradox: whereby decades of civilian rule have not led to significant socio-economic change, while the lack of alignment between democracy and leadership practice remains open (Ibiamu, 2022). Thus, interpreting the democratic failure of the country thus would involve a conceptual synthesis of democracy and leadership with a focus on how the lack of alignment between the two enhances the deficiency of governance, supremacy of elites, and stagnation of development.

Democracy: Between Popular Sovereignty and Procedural Formalism

Democracy is etymologically related to demos (people) and kratos (rule), meaning that democracy is a rule by the people on behalf of the people (Boryczka, 2008). Traditionally, classical Athens was an example of direct democracy where people took part in the communal decision-making process themselves. Contemporary states are mainly of representative democracy, whereby representatives of the citizens are elected to represent the people in their interactions with the state machinery (Boryczka, 2008). Liberal democratic theory highlights that democracy goes beyond periodic elections. It includes political pluralism, rule of law, institutional accountability, civil liberties, and minority rights protection (Oyigebe & Yakubu, 2023). Substantive democracy is achieved once these principles are transformed into concrete realities, social justice, inclusion, equitable distribution of resources, and better citizen welfare (Zilla, 2022). In Nigeria, democracy has been procedural. Although elections are conducted more or less on a regular basis, there are systemic flaws in the system, including elite capture, institutional vulnerability, and widespread corruption, which render the accountability mechanism and policy performance of democratic governments flawed (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). As such, democratic institutions are increasingly becoming ritualised practices rather than instruments of transformational governance, which is why there is a paradoxical situation of democracy without development. This proceduralism is an indication of a critical disjunction between the formal form ordering of democratic rule and its ability to provide substantive socio-economic results.

However, vision, accountability, and public stewardship are the three components of leadership (Jonck, 2024). The conceptualisation of leadership is a wide notion of the capacity to influence, mobilise, and direct people and institutions in the direction of shared goals. Classical theorists like Plato, Aristotle, and Rousseau viewed leadership as a profession that was based on justice, wisdom, and serving the people and placed more emphasis on the ethical duties of the people in power. Modern theory builds upon this idea and makes the concept of leadership both relational and institutional, influenced by realities on the ground, governance, and accountability frameworks.

According to Seteolu (2004), six major leadership paradigms are identified in terms of trait, behavioural, attributional, charismatic, transformational, and visionary which identify dimensions of effectiveness applicable in governance. Transformational and visionary leadership emphasise that ethical foresight, planning, and communication can be used to renew society and reform institutions. This type of leadership can manifest the idea of

democracy in policies that can achieve social welfare, economic prosperity, and institutional sustainability (Bakare et al., 2019). A high degree of integrity, transparency, and emotional intelligence are features of effective democratic leadership that allow leaders to achieve trust, enhance institutional legitimacy, and increase citizen engagement. Trends of chronic leadership remain deficient in the Nigerian context, however, which is personalised rule, corruption, ethno-regional favouritism, and policy coherence (Seteolu, 2004). Political power is usually used to consolidate elite interests against serving the greater good and to continue to create poverty, joblessness, infrastructural deficits, and sociopolitical alienation.

Linking Democracy and Leadership: Toward an Analytical Model

It is the interaction between democratic leadership and democratic governance that defines how far democratic institutions can go in bringing about development. An efficient democracy requires leaders that possess democratic principles of responsibility, fairness, inclusion, and obedience of the rule of law, whereas successful leadership depends on the integrity of the institutions and enabling the people (Nwokiki&Chodolue, 2017). In the case of predatory leadership and procedural democracy, the state becomes an elite-led initiative that is not related to the desires and demands of a larger population. This is the case in Nigeria. Weak institutions, systemic corruption, and an exclusivity form of governance allow political elites to use democratic institutions to suit themselves and capture resources at the expense of substantive development not being realized (Akinyetun, 2022). Elite Theory offers an explanatory model, which argues that political and economic dominance is either in the hands of a small ruler caste, which dictates the policy, or is ruled by the large masses of citizens (Damele& Campos, 2022). To this end, the failure of democracy is not only institutional in nature, but also structural in that both democratic ideals and elite-based leadership practices have an incongruity that is inherent to Nigerian democracy. Therefore, the dysfunction is procedural and structural: democratic structures are present in the paper, but the culture of leadership hinders transferring them into the form of public goods, equal development, or social change.

Theoretical Framework

Elite Theory

Elite Theory provides a sound analytical tool to examine the endemic nexus of political leadership, poor democratic performance, and underdevelopment in Nigeria. The theory, first formulated by Vilfredo Pareto (1935), Gaetano Mosca (1939), and Robert Michels (1911) and then honed by C. W. Mills (1956), holds that all societies, though formally politically organized, are actually ruled by a small and cohesive minority. Political, economic, and institutional power is monopolised by this elite group, influencing policy, guiding the process of governance, and in many cases, leveraging the common good to serve their own interests or their classes (Damele & Campos, 2022). Elite Theory, therefore, sheds some light on the structural restriction of how democratic institutions should perform, and it justifies a lack of substantive socio-economic results derived from formal procedures.

Mosca (1939) also conceptualises society as dichotomous in a society where a ruling minority controls and the majority is docile. In this argument, Michels (1911) goes further to add the so-called iron law of oligarchy, which states that even a democratic state puts power in the few hands or groups of a political party, a political organisation, or the allocation of resources, in general (Hamat et al., 2024). This kind of power concentration can lead to a loss of participatory governance, a compromised system of accountability, and the continuation of social and economic inequality.

Elite Theory explains how since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999, socio-political and economic power has been concentrated in the hands of a small group of actors in Nigeria. The members of this elite include politicians, military participants, industrialists, and religious leaders, whose interconnected networks are in charge of policymaking, institutions, and resource allocation (Sufyan & Dauda, 2025). The idea of the power elite concept by Mills (1956) can be used to describe this constellation, as it is an overlapping of political, economic, and military power that strengthens hegemony by the elite and supports systemic inequalities.

Democratic consolidation revolves around the behaviour of the elites. In situations where political and economic elites advance themselves at the expense of institutional norms, democratic processes become weak and inefficient (Akinyetun, 2022). In Nigeria, stakeholders use this undeveloped institutionalisation to manipulate the electoral process, misappropriate state resources, and consolidate the principles of neopatrimonialism, in which loyalty to the leaders takes precedence over institutional accountability (Oyetunde, 2022). These practices undermine trust in the citizenry and democratic legitimacy, and block the continuity and efficacy of policies.

The legitimacy of governance is gauged by the ability of good governance to address the needs of society. Self-interest and lack of collective good have been strengthened by elite prioritisation in self-interest over collective welfare in Nigeria, institutional corruption, and ineffective management of resources (Babalola, 2024). Therefore, democratic institutions are used as tools for elite concurrence, clientelism, and political bargaining in lieu of inclusive citizen involvement. Nigerian democracy is thus more of an elite-based system than an actual representative-based system. Arising from the above, this theoretical prism guides three important dimensions of the critical analysis of the study. First, when the elite takes over, it becomes difficult to ensure accountability in the state since the independence of the institutions is compromised, and leaders can act without much oversight. Second, leadership behaviours that are influenced by elite self-interest impair the transfer of procedural into substantive developments, and socio-economic developments still stand at the same point. Third, with elite-based governance spanning over time, there is a need to undertake institutional reforms that will increase transparency and accountability and curb the acquisition of power to aid democratic consolidation. Thus, by placing leadership and developmental inadequacies in structural constraints, the Elite Theory highlights the fact that until the institutions that are controlled by the elite are reformed and progressive leaders are given the opportunity to serve their country, democracy in Nigeria will remain merely a form on paper.

The Nexus Between Democracy, Leadership, and Development

The linkage between democracy, political leadership, and national development has been a leading concern in political science discourse, development studies discourse, and governance research discourse. Although democratic governance is often praised for its ability to help achieve socioeconomic development, both past and present cases have shown that the mere presence of democratic institutions does not necessarily create development. Instead, democracy's ability to provide real-life benefits to society relies on the quality, responsibility, and foresight of political leadership (Gberevbie, 2014). The Nigerian case is an illustration of such dynamism, with twenty years of unbroken civilian government since 1999 accompanied by endemic poverty, infrastructural inadequacy, poor institutions, and systemic corruption (Akinyetun et al., 2021).

Democracy as the Empowerment of Development

Conceptually, democracy is a system that entrenches the involvement of citizens, representation, and accountability mechanisms, which are generally recognised to be the prerequisites of fair development (Boryczka, 2008). Democratic regimes, in contrast to authoritarian and military regimes, which often restrict freedoms, suppress dissent, and monopolise decision-making by a small group of people, are supposed to offer a channel of citizen participation, expression, and state accountability. According to Vincent et al. (2025), democracies can be said to have structural benefits in the form of transparent policy procedures, electoral accountability, and institutionalised engagement which together provide the context of inclusion and sustainable development. Meanwhile, the concept of development to enlarge substantive freedoms popularised by Sen (1999) supports this perspective because he opines that political rights, social involvement, and civic liberty are components of human and economic development. In this sense, democracy is an avenue where citizens exercise their agency, check leadership, and demand policies that suit the common good. Empirical research in sub-Saharan Africa confirms that countries with stronger democratic institutions tend to have higher degrees of human development, especially education, health, and social services, when accompanied by effective leadership (Diori&NaRanong, 2022).

Leadership as the Functional Core of Democracy

Leadership forms the basis of operation in which the principles of democracy are transformed into tangible developmental results. Political leaders are the linkages between institutional processes and individual goods; that is, they make sense of what citizens want, mobilise resources, and carry out reforms in the form of policy (Koliba, 2024). The idea of leadership, as studied within the democratic framework, is not only formally defined but also characterized by the ability to make practical changes in the lives of citizens using vision, strategic planning, and moral accountability. In Nigeria, the potential of democratic institutions has often been compromised by the quality of political leadership. The form of personalism, rent-seeking behaviour, and patronage politics have become the order of the day since 1999 (Nkwede&Emordi, 2018). According to government audits, there is massive mismanagement of government funds. The Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) in its 2023 report shows that approximately \$8.3 billion in oil revenues remained unaccounted for (Oriental News, 2023), weakening investments in infrastructure, healthcare, and education.

The above serve to explain that the lack of leadership, and not democracy, is a major challenge to development. It is common to find that political elites attach more weight to ethno-regional loyalty, clientelism, and personal enrichment instead of national interests. Such a trend has become a source of economic inequalities and regional differences: whereas in urban centres, the concentration of investments has contributed to development, rural regions, have been plagued by infrastructural inertia, lack of educational services, and health services (Ezenwa et al., 2025). As a result, democracy in Nigeria is a procedural democracy in which elections alone bestow legitimacy but do not lead to substantive benefits.

Democracy, Leadership and Development Interdependence

Democracy and development cannot happen without leadership. Democracy has a structure that ensures accountability, transparency, and involvement, and leadership is the determining factor on whether these mechanisms benefit the populace or continue to uphold elite domination. Since leadership must be visionary, accountable, and inclusive, democracy has the ability to initiate policy changes, economic growth, and promote equal social results. On the other hand, predatory leadership compromises institutional integrity, spreads corruption, and interferes with development. Empirical experience from Nigeriashows that the quality of leadership moderates the association between procedural democracy and developmental paths. The poor, lack of employment, insecurity, and lack of infrastructure are all signs of

missed opportunities by political elites over the years to use democratic institutions to serve the country. Lack of leadership intensifies social imbalance and breeds conflict, thus placing further restrictions on development. Nigeria is a case in point of how poor leadership undermines both security and human development in the northern parts of the country that have been plagued by a long-standing insurgency, lack of governance, and disregard of social amenities. At the same time, the agglomeration of wealth and infrastructure in the south and cities shows the spatial consequences of an elite-dominated form of governance (Pinto, 2020). These trends highlight the fact that the democratic potential of democracy cannot be actualised in the context whereby leadership does not operationalise participatory mechanisms towards the benefit of a large number of people.

Poor Leadership and Democratic Governance Crisis in Nigeria

Democracy thrives on accountability, institutional integrity, respect for the rule of law, and the participation of citizens. It does not just legitimise its impact by the ability to hold democratic principles into actual betterments in the common good and social-economic growth, but by periodic elections. This is not the case in Nigeria. Resilient leadership failures, institutional weaknesses, elite control, and institutionalised corruption are still eroding the democratic journey.

Bad Leadership in Nigeria

Leadership failure is one of the most significant factors in the endless crises in Nigeria. Dynamics such as electoral manipulation, political violence, and patronage-based systems that promote loyalty and ethnicity over competence, undermine institutional credibility, and entrenched elite power are very present in Nigeria (Akinyetun, 2022). The magnitude of leadership failures is emphasised with the help of empirical evidence. The representation of Nigeria as one of the most corrupt countries by Transparency International (2024) and the report of unaccounted oil revenues reveals the institutional weaknesses and predation of elites in the country. The above trends shed light on the structural connection between poor governance and lack of leadership: a leader prone to self-enrichment and patrimonial loyalty is bound to destroy opportunities for democratic development. Lack of leadership has not only economic implications but also major political and social implications. Yagboyaju and Akinola (2019) argue that personalisation of power breeds incoherence of policies, undermines accountability systems, and breeds a culture of impunity. In most cases, political elites are more interested in instant electoral objectives at the expense of long-term developmental policies, a vice that undermines the delivery of services to the population in areas that are paramount to the development of human capital like education, health, and infrastructure.

Weak Institutions and Democratic Fragility

Democratic consolidation cannot be achieved without strong institutional support. They maintain checks and balances, rule of law, and mechanisms of accountability and trust of people. The politics of patronisation and elite capture continue to compromise institutional independence in Nigeria. Other critical democratic institutions, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the judiciary, and anti-corruption agencies, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), often work under political influence, which undermines their functional performance as well as their legitimacy among the population (Mgbeahuruike, 2025). Democratic legitimacy rests on the centrality of electoral institutions which have been accused on numerous occasions of bias and manipulation. Several gubernatorial elections and presidential elections were contested between 2003 and 2019 as a result of the ballot rigging, vote buying, and disenfranchisement of opposition voters (Akinyetun, 2021). Reports reveal that the INEC was at various times prone to political influence, which weakens the image of

the elections and supported a spiral of elite domination. Equally, the judiciary, which is supposed to apply electoral and anti-corruption laws, has been accused of biased adjudication, which is not only a systemic weakness but also an impact of influential forces (Akinyetun et al., 2025). Thus, democratic frailty results from poor institutions. When the oversight bodies cannot fulfil their mandate without being biased, the leaders will operate with impunity, and the rule of law will be nothing but a theoretical provision. This leads to a hollow democracy, in which there are procedural institutions that lack the conversion into substantive governance or empowerment of citizens (Akinyetun, 2022).

Destruction of Civic Confidence and Political Apathy

Reduction in the level of trust among people in political institutions is one of the most significant impacts of bad leadership in Nigeria. Citizens are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the idea that politics is something that belongs to self-interested elites and are experiencing feelings of political apathy due to it (Ezenwa et al., 2025). The recurring decline in voter turnout shows this tendency. This lack of engagement highlights the lack of engagement between citizens and the political process which undermines the democratic process and leaves the elites with no check in their quest to acquire power and resources. Elite domination is not just a consequence, but also a mechanism of reinforcement, which is political apathy. The withdrawal of citizens also means that leaders will not have much accountability pressure that would allow them to continue with patronage politics, corruption, and negligence of policies. The ensuing disenfranchisement-governance-deficit cycle is one of the reasons why Nigerian democratic institutions do not realise their developmental role.

Meanwhile, the greatest and most evident form of leadership failure in Nigeria is corruption. It distorts the priorities of policies, misplaces resources, and further damages social equity (Transparency International, 2024). An example of systemic corruption in Nigeria is illustrated in the public sector, where inflated contracts, ghost workers, patronising appointments, and embezzlement are constructive normal practices at the expense of key social departments. With this kind of mismanagement, inequality becomes institutionalised, regional inequalities are sustained, and developmental change is hampered. As an illustration, infrastructural investments in southern urban centres are concentrated against chronic neglect in the north, where insurgency, poverty, and unemployment are chronic. These trends explain why leaders' failure is a direct conversion to developmental paralysis. Moreover, political authority has always been individualistic, where ethnic, regional, or personal interests are exercised at the expense of the national interest (Ibiamu, 2022). The political appointments and allocation of resources are dominated by patrimonial networks to the detriment of meritocracy and to the benefit of socioeconomic inequalities.

To be sure, the effects of poor leadership are not limited to the government, but to the welfare of society. Nigeria is always among the nations with the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, as it is estimated that youth unemployment rates is 33% (NBS, 2022). These socio-economic issues coupled with insecurity in the North-East, North-West, and some parts of the Niger Delta portray a failure by various political leaders to use democratic institutions to develop in an inclusive manner. Democracy is, therefore, being compromised to become a legitimising instrument of elite authority, other than a system of equitable growth and empowering citizens.

Research Methods

The study was based on a qualitative research design as secondary data weresourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, archival records, newspapers, and authoritative

online databases. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data, which allowed identifying the patterns, trends, and stories on political leadership, governance, and democratic development in Nigeria systematically. The selection of secondary sources was done purposely as they were relevant, credible, and extensive in their analysis of the topic. The thematic content helped analyse the democratic course of Nigeria in a systematic way and the connection between the quality of leadership, the performance of the institutions, and the results of the development processes. Historical and structural contextualisation were also made possible through this approach to describe patterns of governance amidst long-term failures in leadership and elite capture. To ensure validity and reliability, methodological triangulation was conducted by means of cross reporting of sources so that the results would be internally coherent and reflective of larger socio-political realities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

An overview of Nigerian democracy since 1999 shows that there has been a multifaceted interaction of political leadership and democratic institutions and development. Although democracy is theoretically empowered with accountability, participation, and equitable governance mechanisms, as the case of Nigerians shows, institutional strength is not sufficient in promoting development. The problem here is a failure of leadership, as this always undermines democratic possibilities and stalls development. Nigeria has suffered under leadership that is characterized by corruption, impunity, and patrimonialism, whereby the interest of the people is ignored. Political elites have increasingly undermined democratic processes and state machineries to attain individual power, drain resources, and institutionalise patronage. These malpractices simply erode institutional capacity, undermine people's trust, and result in citizens' disengagement. Therefore, Nigeria's democracy is usually procedural but not substantive, which generates electoral rituals without transformative governance or sustainable socioeconomic gains. These dynamics were analysed using Elite Theory. Nigeria's sociopolitical and economic influence is still held by a small number of players who distort democratic values to maintain their control. Elite capture is a theory that clarifies how weak institutions, inefficiencies in governance, and stagnated development continue to persist because democratic failure in Nigeria is more of a leadership issue than an institutional one. However, there is still much potential in the Nigerian democratic system. With proper leadership accountable and visionary, institutions of democracy may instill transparency, civility, and development that is policy-oriented. The analysis highlights that efficient leadership that can be characterized by integrity, futuristic vision, policy focus, and citizen-oriented decision-making is key to the conversion of the idea of democracy into real developmental results. Thus, democratic deficit is not a systemic issue but a result of the mismanagement of the leadership and the domination of the elites.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were proffered. First, the judiciary, legislature, electoral institutions, and anti-corruption institutions should be shielded against politics. Institutional independence, transparency, and capacity building are essential to the improvement of accountability and the rebuilding of public trust in democratic processes. Second, political parties and civil society organizations must prioritise competence, integrity, and visionary capacity in leadership choices. Candidate vetting, leadership training mechanisms, and performance accountability can be used to have leaders who are dedicated to the development of the nation. Third, well-structured civic education programs may enable citizens to discuss informed voting, participate in the development of policies, and demand accountability from the leaders. Voter apathy should be minimised to develop a political culture that embraces ethical and competent leadership. Furthermore, effective anti-corruption systems, combined with high compliance with financial and ethical regulations,

are necessary to avoid elite capture and promote fair distribution of resources. Finally, the government should aim to eradicate poverty, create jobs, build infrastructure, and distribute wealth evenly. Reducing socioeconomic inequalities increases citizens' trust in democratic institutions and leads to national cohesion. The power concentration, lack of accountability in the federal power, and institutionalised transparency, checks, and balances should be curtailed through constitutional and policy changes to ensure that the interests of the people are safeguarded. A system of structural oversight is required to limit elite domination and foster elite leadership reflexivity that corresponds to the overall common good.

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