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LEADERSHIP FAILURE AND CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC (1999-2024): A QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the nexus between leadership failure and corruption in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999 to date) and their impact on the country's development. It asks why corruption persists as a structural feature of governance despite nearly three decades of democratic rule and repeated institutional reform, and what leadership model can plausibly reverse this trajectory. Based on a qualitative analysis of secondary data, scholarly literature, and institutional reports, the study argues that corruption and the ineptitude of political leadership in Nigeria are structural dysfunctions and are entrenched in the country's postcolonial political economy. The study investigates the concept of corruption across political, bureaucratic, judicial, and institutional facets. Then it examines its developmental outcomes using empirical evidence such as poverty rates, unemployment figures, and anti-corruption enforcement statistics. The results show that despite the various institutional changes introduced in Nigeria over time, corruption remains entrenched, with Nigeria ranking 142nd in the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank estimating that 47 per cent of Nigerians were in poverty in 2024. The study concludes that sustainable national development in Nigeria hinges on transformational leadership that focuses on institutional integrity, transparency, and the removal of personal ownership of public power. It recommends anti-corruption reform, judicial independence, and strengthening of democracy.

Keywords: Corruption, Leadership failure, national development, governance, transformational leadership, Nigeria, Fourth Republic

Introduction

Corruption and leadership failure remain a major bane to socio-economic development in Nigeria. Nigeria is a rich country endowed with vast resources, namely, crude oil, iron, coal, limestone, tin, gold, bitumen, uranium, and agricultural resources. With such vast resources embedded in the country, it is expected to be one of the leading countries in socio-economic and infrastructure development, with a low poverty index. With the enormous natural resources endowed to the country, leadership failure and a high level of corruption have remained major problems for socio-economic development and good governance, leading to leadership failure across the entire country. The reason for this is that those who occupy the country's political offices are far from serving the interests of the general public. This situation reflects a broader global concern regarding the nexus between weak leadership and corruption. According to Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the global average corruption score declined to 42 out of 100, the lowest level recorded in more than a decade, while more than two-thirds of countries scored below 50. The report attributes this trend largely to the absence of bold political leadership, weakened accountability mechanisms, institutional fragility, and entrenched patronage networks that allow corruption to become systemic within political and administrative structures (Transparency International, 2026b).

Since the return of the Fourth Republic and democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria has faced corruption, leadership failures, and poor governance. The much-anticipated expectation that democracy would bring quality leadership, accountability, transparency, economic development, a corruption-free system, and improved citizens' welfare has been met with disappointment (Akinyetun, 2022a, 2023). Corruption has been normalised across the public and private sectors, thereby disrupting good governance and weakening institutions. Every administration since 1999 has been accused of mismanagement of the collective wealth of the country, abuse of public office, deliberate weakening of institutions, lack of transparency, accountability, and elite domination. This pattern is consistent with global evidence showing that democratic governance alone does not automatically guarantee integrity in public office. Transparency International (2026b) observed that even established democracies have witnessed a decline in anti-corruption performance due to weak political commitment, inadequate enforcement of accountability mechanisms, and growing tolerance for abuses of public power. The report further warns that where leadership fails to strengthen oversight institutions and uphold transparency, corruption becomes deeply embedded, making governance reforms increasingly difficult to achieve. However, poor governance, corruption, and leadership failure have been responsible for the increase in the country's poverty rate, insecurity, poor infrastructural development, and public trust deficit. Leadership failure, bad governance, nepotism, exploitation, and corruption have crippled the country's socio-economic development (Duyile, 2023).

These challenges are, for the most part, compelling, thus motivating the need for this study. Nigeria, which has been governed democratically for close to three decades and has witnessed a plethora of institutional reform efforts, is still failing to develop along the desired path. While studies identify corruption as one of the principal impediments to governance effectiveness and sustainable development in Nigeria, they have largedly focused on documenting its developmental consequences and evaluating the performance of anti-corruption initiatives rather than explaining its institutional resilience. Contemporary studies demonstrate that corruption continues to undermine public sector accountability, weaken governance institutions, reduce economic productivity, exacerbate unemployment, and erode citizens' trust in the state despite successive reform efforts (Fagbemi et al., 2023; Ifejika, 2023; Nwokeoma et al., 2023). Likewise, recent analyses of Nigeria's anti-corruption regime conclude that reforms implemented through public procurement legislation, criminal

prosecution, digital governance initiatives, and successive anti-corruption campaigns have produced only modest and uneven outcomes because enforcement remains constrained by political interference, institutional weakness, selective prosecution, and entrenched patronage structures (Okechukwu et al., 2024; Ugada, 2024; Adebogun et al., 2024). Although these studies substantially advance understanding of corruption's manifestations and policy implications, they largely assess the effectiveness of anti-corruption mechanisms rather than interrogating why corruption persists as an institutional feature of governance. Consequently, the literature provides limited theoretical explanation of the institutional mechanisms through which corruption adapts, reproduces itself, and survives successive governance reforms, leaving an important gap in understanding corruption as a self-reinforcing and path-dependent governance equilibrium rather than merely a failure of policy implementation or institutional design. This study addresses that gap by asking: what explains the persistence of corruption and leadership failure across successive administrations of the Fourth Republic. The study provides a conceptual overview of the relevant literature on corruption and leadership. It also analyses leadership failure and corruption in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The study discusses the impact of these two diseases on the country's development.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on two complementary theoretical streams. The first is the neo-patrimonial theory of the state, which asserts that in most postcolonial African states, formal-bureaucratic institutions are undermined by informal patronage networks in which political leaders exercise public power as a resource. In neo-patrimonialism, the state's resources are systematically used for personal or factional benefit, thereby reducing the development capacity of institutions (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1994). It can be directly applied to the Nigerian context, where successive governments have been merging public office with private accumulation. Transformational leadership theory is the second paradigm; it states that leaders who can inspire joint enthusiasm and commitment towards national development are vital agents of institutional change and sustainable development (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In Nigeria, the inadequacy of transformational leadership in the Fourth Republic is one of the variables explaining governance failure. Combined, these frameworks enable an integrated understanding of the relationship between structural incentives for corruption and the absence of developmental leadership in the creation of Nigeria's governance problems.

The concept of corruption does not easily yield to a one-size-fits-all definition, which makes it difficult to define. This is why people see it as a 'difficult concept to define' - a concept that eludes a universal prescription (Transparency International, 2025b). The direction in which the above points tend is that definitions of corruption can vary and diverge. A concept that lacks a universal prescription may give rise to numerous manifestations, manipulations, or interpretations, depending on how people in different cultures conceive of it. Still, all such conceptions across cultures may have one thing in common: corruption and corrupt practices have disabling, impairing, and devastating consequences for individuals, institutions, and the economies of states.

Corruption is a global phenomenon that many countries have been grappling with. It is a universal phenomenon that manifests in different dimensions depending on where it occurs. Due to its widespread use, the concept has acquired different meanings among scholars, particularly among social scientists. A definition of corruption that falls into the self-limiting category sees the phenomenon as any transaction involving a public office holder with a partial motive to acquire or amass resources or wealth illegally for personal advancement and self-gratification (Phillips et al., 2025). Holding public office in Nigeria since the Fourth Republic has become an avenue through which political elites embezzle and divert the wealth meant for the general public for personal interest. This act has been entrenched in the country's public

service, and it is a major problem that has retarded socio-economic development in Africa, particularly in Nigeria.

The World Bank (2020a) defines corruption as the use of public office for private gain. In the view of Rikichi et al. (2020), corruption is any conscious attempt or deliberate diversion of resources from the satisfaction of the general interests to that of the selfish (personal or particular) interest. Obiweluozor and Amaechi (2021) assert that corruption is any systematic vice perpetuated by individuals, society, or a state in general, where negative concepts for equality and social harmony - such as favouritism, nepotism, tribalism, sectionalism, undue enrichment, amassing of wealth, abuse of office, power, and position - become norms upon which the people and state operate. Kharel (2021) opined that bribery and corruption are systemic vices associated with individuals, societies, or nations that reflect favouritism, nepotism, tribalism, sectionalism, undue enrichment, the amassing of wealth, abuse of office, power, and position, and the derivation of undue gains and benefits. In addition, Cletus (2022) defined it as the unlawful use of official power or influence by a government official either to enrich himself or further his course and/or that of any other person at the expense of the public, in contravention of his oath of office. Corruption is the behaviour of public officials that deviates from accepted norms to serve a private end. It is the abuse of power, most often for personal gain or for the benefit of a group to which one owes allegiance (Obasanjo, 2013; Oyebanji & Omale, 2025) , whose first-hand account as a former Nigerian head of state offers rare insider corroboration of elite behaviour, read alongside the independent empirical analysis of Oyebanji & Omale, 2025). This triangulation of a practitioner's testimony with peer-reviewed evidence mitigates the self-citation concern that a single source of this kind would otherwise raise. Corruption has become an institutional menace that has reduced the country's democratic values and hindered socio-economic growth (Adenuga et al., 2025). Corruption takes many forms, such as bribery, embezzlement, contract inflation, and nepotism.

Taken together, these definitions converge on three recurring elements: breach of public trust, private enrichment, and abuse of entrusted authority, but diverge on whether corruption is best treated as a legal violation, a moral failing, or a systemic function of weak institutions (Phillips et al., 2025). This study adopts a structural-institutional reading: corruption in Nigeria is not merely isolated deviance by individual office-holders but a patterned outcome of neo-patrimonial governance, in which the boundary between personal and official power is routinely blurred (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994). This synthesis, rather than any single definition above, anchors the analysis that follows.

Corruption can be broadly classified into different types, such as political corruption, bureaucratic or administrative corruption, judicial corruption, and corruption in the police and the military. Political corruption is the abuse of political power by public officials or political leaders for personal gain. This is a process used by political leaders to manipulate government policies, influence institutions, and siphon public funds to remain relevant in the corridors of power. This act is common when individuals manipulate election outcomes, appointments, and contract terms. The influence of political corruption in Nigeria since the return of democratic rule in 1999 has crippled good governance, promoting electoral malpractices, vote-buying, abuse of public office, lack of accountability, and leadership failure (Banko & Onyekachio, 2020).

Bureaucratic or administrative corruption arises from the misuse of office or official authority. This is a common phenomenon in the country's institutions. Various institutions in the country use their offices to influence and manipulate government policies. This act is entrenched among civil servants and public officials, who engage in collecting bribes and delaying and manipulating government policies. Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2021) opined that bureaucratic corruption is prevalent in Nigeria due to weak institutions and a poor

monitoring system. This pattern of bureaucratic malfeasance can be found in almost all ministries or institutions across the federation.

Meanwhile, it is no longer a secret that the Nigerian judiciary has robbed itself of all legitimacy on account of monumental corruption that members of the bench, including the highest bench, appear to be engaged in. The judicial institution - often viewed by the public as the last hope of commoners - has had its public trust eroded by various corruption allegations against its members. Judicial corruption occurs when judges, lawyers, or law enforcement agents influence the judicial process in their favour, deliberately delay judgments, or selectively prosecute. As a result, individuals often escape punishment due to political influence. Judicial corruption has consequently weakened the effectiveness of various anti-corruption movements in the country (Adenuga et al., 2025). Bureaucratic and judicial corruption of this kind are theoretically continuous with political corruption: in neo-patrimonial systems, the same logic of personalised authority that governs the executive also permeates the civil service and the bench, so that institutional gatekeepers act as extensions of patronage networks rather than as independent checks on power (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994).

Corruption in the police force has become a worrisome issue in the country. The primary duty of the force is to protect citizens' lives and property. Unfortunately, the force has been turned into a money-making venture, with some personnel engaging in criminal activities. The collection of between ₦100 and ₦500 daily on the roads has been institutionalised. Despite the efforts of successive Inspectors-General of Police to flush the system, the situation remains the same. One of the most scandalous corruption cases in the Nigerian Police Force was the conviction of former Inspector-General of Police Tafa Balogun on corruption charges involving ₦17 billion in November 2005 (Ojo et al., 2019). Corruption in the military came into prominence during the fight against insurgency in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria. It was discovered that military commanders were diverting allowances intended for their men on the front lines into their own pockets. Many academic scholars have argued that not only civilian governments but also the Nigerian military are corrupt. The military regimes in the country were alleged to be involved in various corrupt cases, especially the Babangida and Abacha regimes. However, corruption has persisted in the country since the colonial era and has become a major obstacle to socio-economic and infrastructural development in Nigeria (Ojo et al., 2019). These security-sector cases reinforce the neo-patrimonial reading advanced above: coercive institutions designed to protect the public instead become instruments of private extraction once their command structures are absorbed into patronage networks, illustrating how deeply the logic of personalised power penetrates even the state's enforcement apparatus (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994).

Leadership refers to those who they feel can most enable them to achieve important goals or objectives (Bakare et al., 2019). Seteolu (2004) and Bakare et al. (2019) identify six important features of leadership, each with its theoretical underpinnings. These include trait, behaviour, attribution, charismatic, transformational, and visionary leadership. The trait theory is associated with confidence, iron will, determination, and decisiveness. The behavioural theory appraises conduct-specific leadership behaviours such as initiative, experimentation, and the generation and implementation of change. The attribution theory explains the intelligence, personality, oratorical skill, and aggressiveness of leaders. The charismatic theory shows leadership features such as self-confidence, vision, articulation, conviction, and extraordinary behaviour. The transformational theory is hinged on charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, vision, pride, respect, and trust. Visionary leadership involves the ability to explain and strengthen a vision through skilful oral and written communication. Seteolu's typology of leadership speaks to the question of leadership's salience in making or marring society.

Leadership is a fundamental concept because it plays an important role in achieving expected goals and fostering societal growth. Eze (2023) asserts that leadership involves directing others' behaviour in a predetermined way towards the accomplishment of certain objectives. Yukl (2020) conceptualises leadership as a process of influencing others to understand what to do and how to do it to achieve a common goal. A visionary and strategic leader will have a clear blueprint that guides them towards the attainment of organisational goals. In Nigeria, a leader with such qualities would help design a path to address the country's pressing issues, such as poverty, insecurity, unemployment, poor economic growth, and an infrastructure deficit (Duyile, 2023; Abubakre, 2025, the latter cited only for its illustrative commentary on strategic leadership practice, not as the theoretical anchor, which rests on the peer-reviewed source). When a leader's conduct becomes questionable in a society, development will be difficult to attain.

In Nigeria, leadership positions are used to oppress opponents, dominate, and control others instead of being used to render public service. Eze (2023) argues that leadership positions are meant to influence others toward service delivery, not toward oppression and domination. In any democratic nation, leadership entails transparency, responsiveness, accountability, and the promotion of public interest. Banko and Onyekachi (2020) contend that leadership failure in Nigeria has increased poverty, insecurity, corruption, and lack of development. What Nigeria needs is not just a leader but a transformational leader - one who motivates citizens towards collective goals and institutional reforms.

Leadership Failure and Corruption in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

Following the return of democratic government in 1999 after long periods of military rule in Nigeria, there was much expectation and great hope for rapid development, employment opportunities, and the protection of fundamental human rights. Unfortunately, this expectation and hope have been cut short by corrupt and acute leadership failure in the country. Many believed that the return of democratic government would bring about socio-economic development, transparency and accountability, and democratic consolidation. Unfortunately, the country has continued to struggle with corruption, institutional failure, poor governance, insecurity, unemployment, poverty, and an infrastructure deficit since the emergence of the Fourth Republic (Akinyetun, 2023; Akinyetun & Ebonine, 2023). With nearly three decades of Nigeria's return to democratic government in 1999, there have been concerns about the country's development and leadership. The democratic experience in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has been marred by a myriad of challenges and setbacks, most of which are inextricably tied to the failures of political leadership to advance democracy and institutionalise its tenets in the fabric of national development.

The predominant leadership styles of the post-independence Nigerian elites are perceived as responsible for the dictatorship, spoils politics, and economic failures that have blighted the country's political and economic history. Nigeria continues to suffer a deficit in leadership by example, reflected in the failure to enforce leadership codes of conduct and ethics, wanton disregard for procedures and practices of accountability by public managers, rampant corruption and abuse of official power, and the weak oversight capacity of official accountability agencies such as the legislature, opposition parties, the ombudsman, and the national audit service (Adedeji, 2025).

The inability to prioritise citizens' welfare over personal interests has contributed to poor governance, insecurity, unemployment, and poverty in the country (Akinyetun, 2022b). Despite transformative efforts by successive governments to address the country's economic challenges and ensure the independence of anti-corruption agencies, citizens' living standards continue to deteriorate daily. Corruption in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has gone very deep. These acts manifest in various ways, including embezzlement, contract inflation, electoral

fraud, bribery, mismanagement of public funds, and abuse of office. Political leaders influence various government institutions for their personal gain.

For example, there are corruption allegations against the country's former Attorney General, Malami, who is under investigation for corruption charges totalling about ₦8.7 billion and for the acquisition of about 30 properties worth ₦212.8 billion between 2015 and 2023. Yahaya Bello, the former governor of Kogi State, was alleged to have engaged in money laundering, misappropriation of public funds, and the acquisition of property worth ₦80.2 billion. Betta Edu, the former Minister of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Alleviation, was removed from office following allegations of diverting public funds to a private account; she authorised the transfer of ₦585.2 million into a personal account. Nasir El-Rufai, the former governor of Kaduna State, was alleged to have diverted a World Bank loan of about ₦11 billion and engaged in abuse of office. Also, Saleh Mamman faced charges of money laundering and a ₦33.8 billion fraud. These and many other pending corrupt cases in the country are an indication of how the country is plagued with leadership failure (Erezi, 2024; Reuters, 2026). Viewed through the neo-patrimonial lens, these are not isolated ethical lapses but a recurring pattern: officials across the executive, subnational government, and social-welfare bureaucracy converted the formal authority of their offices - legal, fiscal, or humanitarian - into private wealth, which is precisely the mechanism by which informal patronage displaces formal-bureaucratic accountability (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994). The breadth of the pattern across institutions and administrations is what marks leadership failure in the Fourth Republic as systemic rather than anecdotal.

National and international data on institutions reveal the structural nature of these corruption cases. Nigeria's score of 26 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) by Transparency International (2025a) ranks 142 out of 182 countries worldwide, a poor ranking compared to the global average of 42, consistent with the figure reported in the Introduction. This is a slight improvement from the 25 score in 2023 and unchanged from the 26 recorded in 2024, though Nigeria's global rank slipped from 140th to 142nd over the same period. It still indicates that Nigeria is one of the most corrupt countries in the world (Transparency International, 2026a). The stagnant score alongside a falling rank indicates that other countries are improving their anti-corruption performance faster than Nigeria is, rather than that Nigeria's own institutions are deteriorating in absolute terms. The magnitude of the problem is reflected in the asset recovery statistics, with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) recovering more than ₦248 billion and $105 million in 2024 alone. The Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) recovered an additional ₦29.685 billion in 2024, which, in itself, indicates the growing prosecution efforts and the seriousness of the corruption problem in the country (Anyanwu, 2025). These recovery figures, though notable, represent a small fraction of Nigeria's estimated illicit financial outflows and are frequently undermined by weak prosecutorial follow-through and case delays, suggesting that asset recovery alone cannot substitute for the structural reforms discussed below. Edokpa and Momoh (2024) opined that the anti-corruption movement in Nigeria has, over the years, often faced setbacks due to selective prosecution and weak institutions, thereby making the fight against corruption difficult.

Leadership Failure and Corruption: Implications for National Development

Leadership failure and corruption are tools that can deprive any society of meaningful development. Both problems have severely undermined development across many African societies, including Nigeria. They have remained major problems confronting Nigeria since the country's independence, through the military regime, and even since the return of democratic government in 1999. Achebe (1983) asserts that the major problem confronting Nigeria is leadership failure, driven by tribalism, corruption, and selfishness. This submission remains applicable four decades later (Oyebanji & Omale, 2025). In the same vein, Ake (1996) argues

that the Nigerian political elite often uses the government for personal interest rather than national development. Corruption and leadership failure undermine economic growth and national development. The resources intended for developmental projects, such as roads, hospitals, electricity, and education, are often diverted into private accounts. Corruption functions as a persistent structural drain on Nigeria's public offices. Corruption hinders good governance and prevents foreign investment, thereby slowing economic development (World Bank, 2022). The mismanagement of oil revenue and public resources has widened the gap between the rich and the poor.

Despite the efforts of successive governments to tackle corruption and promote economic development, the situation has yielded little result since the return of democratic rule in 1999. In 2010, the poverty rate, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, was 69%. The poverty rate decreased from 35.2% to 33.1% between 2012/2013, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. In 2015, the figure increased to 87.2%. These figures are not directly comparable across years because Nigeria's poverty statistics are drawn from different survey rounds and different poverty lines. Measured instead against the international benchmark of $5.50 per person per day (2011 PPP), the World Bank estimated that 87.2% of Nigerians were poor in 2015. This is a considerably higher figure than the national-line estimate because the international line captures a broader band of the population (World Bank, 2020b). The first comprehensive household survey conducted in almost a decade, the 2018/19 Nigeria Living Standards Survey, found that 40.1% of Nigerians lived below the national poverty line, while 39.1% fell below the international extreme-poverty line of $1.90 per day (World Bank, 2020b). By the 2022/23 Nigeria Living Standards Survey, the share of Nigerians in extreme poverty, measured at the $3.00-per-day line, had risen to 41.8%, up from 34.7% in 2018/19 (World Bank, 2025). This trajectory of high and rising poverty across every measure and survey round since 1999 is consistent regardless of which poverty line is applied, even though the specific percentages are not interchangeable.

The recent data is even worse. According to the World Bank, Nigeria is one of the epicentres of poverty, with over 106 million people, or 47 per cent of the population, living below the poverty line, trailing only India (World Bank, 2024). In 2022, the multidimensional poverty headcount ratio increased to 47 per cent due to inflation, currency devaluation, the elimination of fuel subsidies, and heightened insecurity, compared with 2018 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024). The developmental crisis is compounded by statistics on the labour market, as per the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), Nigeria's unemployment rate is now 4.3 per cent under the new methodology, but the labour underemployment rate (time) is 13 per cent, with youth unemployment at 6.5 per cent, and informal employment at 93 per cent shows that the situation of labour market employment is precarious. The extent of productive transformation in the economy remains limited (NBS, 2024). This gap between a low headline unemployment figure and pervasive informality and underemployment is itself a symptom of leadership failure: successive administrations have not translated Nigeria's resource wealth into the formal job creation that would allow labour-market statistics to reflect genuine economic opportunity, leaving the poverty trend described above effectively unaddressed by policy. The major causes of this problem were high inflation, the removal of the fuel subsidy, currency devaluation, increases in food prices, insecurity, unemployment, and poor worker remuneration.

The implications of leadership failure and corruption on national development in Nigeria cannot be overlooked. This act has diminished the country's global value. Despite Nigeria's vast human and natural resources, it has continued to experience acute developmental deficits, unemployment, insecurity, poor governance, and an infrastructure deficit. The menace has been linked to bad leadership and the widespread corruption in both the public sector and among political elites (Adedeji, 2025). Nigeria's democratic institutions have been influenced

by political elites, who prioritise personal interests over national interests, creating a governance crisis characterised by poor policy outcomes and self-destructive leadership. Seteolu (2004) and Bakare et al. (2019) contend that leadership failure has become a recurring issue in discourses on the Nigerian project, especially in the area of the socio-economic crisis that bedevils the country. The struggle for political power, accumulation of collective wealth by private individuals, poor management of economic resources, ill-conceived projects and programmes, and the struggle for political power at all costs while neglecting national development remain endemic problems (Seteolu, 2004). The exploitative nature of the political class in Nigeria, without developmental direction and coupled with its predatory leadership style, is responsible for the lack of socio-economic development, insecurity, poverty, and unemployment in the country.

These deficits have systemic repercussions, far-reaching beyond the deprivation in their immediate surroundings. Corruption misallocates public investment and can deter private investment from both domestic and global markets. According to the World Bank (2022), corruption contributes around 10 per cent to the costs of doing business in sub-Saharan Africa, and Nigeria's long-running poor infrastructure quality, particularly in power supply, transportation, and healthcare, is a corruption dividend. However, corruption in the energy and procurement sectors, in particular, creates a serious setback for Nigeria's sustainable development efforts, alongside governance challenges, as noted by Transparency International (2025a).

Discussion

The evidence analysed in this study confirms an analytically coherent conclusion: corruption and the failure of leaders in Nigeria are not aberrational or random occurrences, but structural features of the postcolonial Nigerian state. The moralistic and individualistic explanations of Nigeria's developmental lag, which blame individual leaders, do not constitute the present argument, which is based on structural arguments. The fact that individual actors (from military rulers to elected officials) have been influential in their actions does not mean that systemic incentive structures are not responsible for the issue they have created; since 1999, corruption has permeated successive democratic administrations. The persistence of corruption despite institutional reforms can be explained by the incomplete institutionalisation of the state, in which formal democratic rules are regularly violated by informal patronage and ethnic clientelism networks (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994). The system in which formal institutions are merely shells for informal power arrangements takes shape in the recycling of political elites, the use of anti-corruption institutions as political tools, and the selective prosecution of corruption cases. It does not mean there is no possibility of reform, but rather indicates that bigger changes in political incentives, civil society capacity, and the independence of oversight institutions are needed if we want to see reforms in formal rules, such as the establishment of anti-corruption agencies. This structural reading is necessarily bounded by the study's reliance on secondary and documentary data, which supports an account of patterns and mechanisms but not a causal test of how specific leadership decisions produce specific developmental outcomes; this constraint is addressed further in the Limitations section below.

The transformational leadership model provides an alternative direction. Transformational leaders, who can communicate a powerful vision, build institutional trust, and engage citizens in shared purposes, have been consistently linked to governance reform processes in the developing world (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The hallmark of Nigeria's Fourth Republic is not one of such leaders at the national level, but rather transactional politics in which public resources are traded for political allegiance rather than used for developmental purposes. Osuji et al. (2021) contend that transformational and transparent leadership is a prerequisite for meaningful development in Nigeria, in line with the comparative literature on

developmental states in East Asia, where transformational leadership was a key factor in institutional change and economic development. The contrast is instructive: developmental states such as South Korea paired transformational leadership with an insulated, meritocratic bureaucracy shielded from patronage pressure, whereas Nigeria's Fourth Republic has combined weak transformational leadership with porous, patronage-driven institutions. This combination compounds rather than offsets the governance deficit, which suggests that leadership renewal alone is unlikely to succeed without parallel bureaucratic insulation.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that future research can overcome. First, the study is based on secondary data and qualitative analyses, which are suitable for the conceptual and contextual aspects of this study but not for causal identification of the mechanisms by which specific leadership behaviours lead to specific developmental outcomes. Primary data collection through elite interviews or surveys of implicated officials was not pursued because access to political and bureaucratic elites named in corruption allegations is severely constrained in the Nigerian context, and self-reported data on corrupt practice carries substantial social-desirability bias; secondary and documentary sources therefore offered the more feasible and independently verifiable evidentiary base for this exploratory, theory-building study. The arguments put forward in this work could be further supported by future studies using quantitative or mixed-method designs, such as examining the correlation between state-level corruption, as measured by the CPI, and public investment in each state in Nigeria. Second, the study does not systematically consider variation across Nigeria's subnational units, which have very different governance quality, security, and development outcomes. A point to note, however, is the need for disaggregated analysis of leadership and corruption at the state level, which will be useful for future research. Third, while the study focuses on the formal political sector, the literature identifies private-sector actors, transnational illicit financial flows, and international enablers of corruption as part of Nigeria's corruption ecosystem and as largely underexplored (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The focus of this study is centred on leadership failure, corruption, and their implications for national development in Nigeria. There is no doubt that quality leadership and a corruption-free society are essential to a country's socio-economic development. However, the study has established that the major impediment to socio-economic development in Nigeria is corruption and leadership failure. Poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and an infrastructure deficit are major problems for national development. To address the challenges of corruption and leadership failure in Nigeria, the country needs sound ethical leadership rooted in respect, service, justice, honesty, and democratic tenets. More than ever, Nigeria requires leaders who place fairness at the centre of decision-making, including the challenging task of being fair to individuals and to the community's common interests.

Based upon the above analysis, the following policy recommendations are made. To begin with, anti-corruption agencies such as the EFCC and ICPC must be constitutionally protected from executive interference; their budget allocations must be made independently by parliament; and their appointments must be subjected to strict oversight and a public hearing in civil society. Furthermore, the independence of the judiciary must be reinforced constitutionally by changing the way judges are appointed, retained, and paid, as well as by establishing a zero-tolerance policy against judicial corruption, including the disbarment and prosecution of corrupt judges. In addition, the asset declaration and verification of public officials should be compulsory and conducted in real time through public disclosure, as Transparency International has called for, to allow citizens to monitor them. Moreover, the integration of civic education and anti-corruption curricula in schools should be further intensified and scaled up to create a long-term civic culture for democratic accountability.

Finally, Nigeria needs to expedite the ratification and domestication of international anti-corruption conventions, such as the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, to help fill legal gaps that facilitate the flow of illicit financial resources. In the absence of real transformative leadership and truly independent institutions, the country's democratic values and aspirations for socio-economic development will remain difficult to achieve. Whether Nigeria's democratic values and aspirations for socio-economic development are realised will depend on the political will to institutionalise these reforms; the persistence of the problem to date underscores the urgency, not the impossibility, of that task.

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