

## THE QUEST FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA: THE FOURTH REPUBLIC EXPERIENCE (1999 - 2023)

**ETEBOM John Monday, PhD**

Postdoctoral Fellow

Department of Political Science

University of Alabama, United States of America

jmetebom@ua.edu

**Senior Lecturer**

Department of Local Government and Development Studies

Obafemi Awolowo University

Ile Ife, Nigeria

jmetebom@oauife.edu.ng

### **Abstract**

Nigeria is regarded as the giant of Africa due to its vast population, diverse landscape, and rich natural resources, which mirrors many African nations in its post-colonial journey. Having gained independence from Britain in 1960, a period marked by the Cold War's reshaping global politics, Nigeria has experienced a tumultuous path towards nationhood. This path has been fraught with military coups, civil wars, ethno-religious conflicts, corruption, political instability, insecurity, and economic crises. The transition back to democratic governance in 1999, after nearly three decades under military rule, was met with optimism for a renewed adherence to constitutionalism, the rule of law, and credible democratic processes. However, after two decades of democratic rule and seven electoral cycles, Nigeria still faces significant hurdles in solidifying its democracy. While elections are celebrated as democratic milestones, the persistent challenges in conducting free and credible elections that satisfy all stakeholders remain a critical obstacle in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. This narrative is common across several African nations. This paper conducts a historical analysis of Nigeria's political developments post-independence, examines trends since the 1999 return to democracy, identifies challenges to democratic consolidation, and proposes solutions to consolidate democracy in Nigeria and across the continent. The quantitative study draws on compiled author data and secondary sources, with data analyzed through content analysis.

Keywords: **Democracy, consolidation, fourth republic, election, corruption.**

### **Introduction**

On 29 May 1999, Nigeria returned to democratic governance after nearly three decades under military control, igniting citizens' aspirations for effective governance within a liberal society. Yet,

despite two decades of unbroken civil governance and seven consecutive democratic transitions (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023), the pursuit of democratic sustainability and consolidation remains intense. Essential features of democracy such as adherence to the rule of law, the conduct of free, fair, and competitive elections, constitutionalism, a competitive party system, citizen participation and representation, and transparency and accountability in governance remain elusive.

The nation continues to grapple with a host of challenges including electoral malpractices, violence, frail public institutions, pervasive insecurity, rampant corruption, judicial impropriety, disregard for the rule of law, and deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions, compounded by a general mistrust among the populace. The principle of democratic consolidation fundamentally rests on two assumptions: firstly, the existence of a democratic state, and secondly, the necessity to sustain and enhance the democratic achievements already made (Kolawole, 2011). Nigeria has met the initial condition by transitioning from an authoritarian regime to civil rule, yet it struggles to maintain its democratic framework.

Tracing Nigeria's evolution as a nation begins before its 1960 independence. This paper focuses on the political trajectory from that point to the present, emphasizing the Fourth Republic. From October 1960 to January 1966, the nation enjoyed civil governance (First Republic) until the military intervened in January 1966, dominating for thirteen years until October 1979 when democracy was restored (Second Republic). However, the military swiftly resumed control in December 1983, initiating a sixteen-year reign often referred to as "the second coming of the military." This period also saw the failed attempt at the Third Republic (1990 - 1993) (Etebom, 2015; Zaira, 2013; Adeniyi, 2010; Ola & Tonwe, 2003).

With 29 years of its first 39 years post-independence dominated by military rule (1960 - 1999), Nigeria, like many African nations, has faced repeated military incursions. Despite over two decades of continuous democratic rule, the nation still confronts significant challenges across political, economic, security, electoral, cultural, and unity fronts in its effort to sustain, let alone consolidate democracy (Etebom, 2022). This paper delves into Nigeria's post-independence political history, examines its patterns in the Fourth Republic, identifies key impediments to democratic consolidation, and proposes policy solutions.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **Democracy**

"Democracy" is a term with varied meanings, influenced by philosophical, ideological, political, social, cultural, and economic contexts. Bernard Crick (1993) remarked that "democracy" is one of the most broadly interpreted terms in public affairs, potentially meaning different things to different people and at risk of losing any definitive meaning. According to Freedom House, of the

193 nations recognized by the United Nations, 123 are categorized as democracies, indicating a majority have adopted a system of governance involving the populace in some capacity.

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (1863) offers a foundational definition of democracy as "the government of the people, by the people, and for the people," emphasizing the essential connection between the government and its citizens. The philosophical underpinnings of democracy were initially laid by thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill in the 17th century, who proposed that social institutions should serve to better the individual. Hobbes introduced the idea of the social contract; Locke viewed the consent of the governed as the basis for political power, asserting that "political power is a trust from the people"; Mill defined democracy as governance by the people or a significant portion thereof, through representatives they elect.

Sir Karl Popper posits that:

By democracy, I do not mean something as vague as "the rule of the people" or "the rule of the majority" but a set of institutions (among them especially general elections, i.e. the right of the people to dismiss their government) which permit public control of rulers and their dismissal by the ruled and which makes it possible for the ruled to obtain reforms without using violence, even against the will of the ruler (Popper, 1988).

Lipset, S.M in his book, *The Political Man* (1959), defined:

Democracy is a political system that supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials and a social mechanism that permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office.

From the above definitions, it is evident that elections are no doubt a critical part of the modern democratic process. The 19th century saw further development of these concepts into a more structured liberal democratic theory, advocating for voting rights and representative government, as discussed by thinkers like Bentham and Mill, which continued into the 20th century with the expansion of the franchise to broader demographics, fostering a more egalitarian approach to liberal democracy.

The fundamental purpose of a democratic government is to protect and promote the rights, interests, and welfare of the people, ensuring every individual the freedom to engage in self-

governance. Political freedom is thus central to democracy (Huntington, 1991; Palma, 1990; Dahl, 1966).

#### Basic Tenets of Democratic Rule

1. Supremacy of the people's will
2. Citizen participation
3. Equality
4. Political tolerance
5. Accountability
6. Transparency
7. Periodic elections
8. Independent judiciary
9. Neutrality of state institutions
10. Rule of law
11. Separation of powers
12. Human rights
13. Public opinion and freedom of the press

#### Election

Elections are fundamental to the essence of democracy. Lindberg (2006) posited that elections are often seen as the defining feature of democratic systems, distinguishing civil governance from military rule. The concept of elections, like many in social science, lacks a singular definition. Essentially, an election is a decision-making process allowing a population to select individuals for public office. Since the 17th century, elections have been a primary mechanism in modern representative democracies, filling roles within the executive, legislative, and occasionally the judiciary, along with regional and local governments. This process extends to various private and business organizations, including clubs and corporations.

While democracy involves more than just elections, and ideal democracy includes significant direct participation by citizens, the most basic check on oppressive state authority is our ability to elect and remove decision-makers. Elections provide the public the opportunity to select their leaders freely, marking a fundamental aspect of democracy globally. However, elections often serve as a means to an end, facilitating specific goals or control over governmental power, thus acting as a cornerstone of political authority.

Ujo (2000) describes an election as “a procedure that allows members of an organization or community to choose representatives who will hold positions of authority within it.” This definition highlights the processual nature of elections and their role in involving the populace in selecting their leaders.

In the context of liberal democracy, Schumpeter (1947) views elections as an opportunity for people to accept or reject their rulers. Sandbrook (1988) argued that elections ensure virtually all adult citizens have the right to vote, upholding a broad spectrum of political and civil rights.

Adejumobi (2000) sees elections as a social pact between the state and its people, symbolizing popular sovereignty and defining the foundations of political authority and legitimacy. Elections are pivotal for political accountability and fostering a reciprocal relationship between the governors and the governed.

#### Democratic Consolidation

The concept of democratic consolidation refers to a distinct phase in the shift from authoritarian to civil rule, and by extension, to a democratic system crucial for establishing a stable and enduring democracy (Oni, 2014). This notion is based on two key assumptions: firstly, the existence of a democratic state, and secondly, the need to sustain and reinforce the existing democratic foundations. According to Kolawole (2011), democratic consolidation involves strengthening and solidifying the democratic base to prevent backsliding.

Democratic consolidation also depends on a vibrant civil society that holds public officials accountable and mitigates political conflicts, thus preventing a regression to authoritarianism (Diamond 1994 cited in Oni, 2014).

Literature suggests various criteria to evaluate democratic consolidation. Notably, the ‘two-election test’ or ‘transfer of power test’ evaluates the willingness of political actors to accept electoral defeat and transfer power peacefully. Another criterion, the ‘simple longevity’ or ‘generation test’, posits that a prolonged period of competitive elections, typically 20 years, is sufficient to consider a democracy consolidated, regardless of whether power changes hands. This suggests that continuous electoral processes cultivate a public mindset resistant to non-democratic alternatives.

Despite nominally passing these tests with multiple democratic transitions and two decades of uninterrupted democracy, Nigeria still struggles with implementing the fundamental tenets of democratic rule, as will be further discussed in this paper.

### **Nigerian Post-Independence Political Experience**

The narrative of Nigeria since its independence in 1960 is marked by significant strife and instability. From the outset, the nation grappled with disunity, ineffective leadership, religious intolerance, ethnic divisions, and rampant corruption. According to Pereti (2004), these issues, particularly nepotism and corruption during Prime Minister Balewa's administration, precipitated the military's initial intervention in politics by January 1966, just six years after independence. This intervention was followed by a retaliatory coup by Northern military elements in July 1966, setting a precedent for further political turmoil. These coups catalyzed the brutal Nigerian Civil

War from 1967 to 1970, with General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi became the first military head of state, succeeded by General Yakubu Gowon in July 1966.

The failure of General Gowon's regime to transition to civilian rule post-war was a significant factor leading to its overthrow by General Murtala Mohammed in July 1975. This regime, under General Murtala and later General Olusegun Obasanjo after Murtala's assassination in February 1976 by Lieutenant Colonel B.S. Dimka, eventually succeeded in handing power back to civilians in October 1979.

However, the civilian government led by Alhaji Shehu Shagari was short-lived, lasting only until December 1983 when it was toppled by another military coup led by General Muhammadu Buhari. The coup was justified by citing massive electoral fraud, violence, corruption, and the looming economic collapse. Recent electoral issues in Kogi and Bayelsa under the civilian administration of the same General Buhari highlight a repetitive cycle of political mismanagement and manipulation.

General Buhari's regime was itself overthrown in December 1983 in a bloodless palace coup by General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, often referred to as "the coup of the Generals." During his tenure, General Babangida orchestrated the longest transition program in Nigeria's history, which reached its controversial peak with the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election. This election, widely regarded by observers as the fairest to date, was abruptly nullified, leading to widespread protests.

The turmoil led General Babangida to step down and establish an Interim Government under Chief Ernest Shonekan in August 1993. This government was short-lived, ousted in another palace coup by General Sanni Abacha in November 1993, and criticized for lacking legitimacy and failing to command respect from state governors.

The political landscape shifted dramatically again with the unexpected death of General Abacha on June 8, 1998, allowing Major General Abdulsalam Abubakar to assume power. He dissolved existing political entities and set a new timeline for returning to civilian governance. This culminated in the presidential elections that ultimately led to the restoration of democracy on May 29, 1999, ending nearly three decades of military dominance.

### **Challenges to Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic**

The fourth republic began on 29 May 1999. Scholarly works have pinpointed several factors contributing to the challenges of democratic consolidation in Nigeria since it gained independence in 1960. Key among these are historical constraints stemming from the circumstances of colonial formation, significant military interventions in politics for nearly three decades post-independence,

and enduring issues in leadership. Additional challenges include widespread poverty, corruption, political violence, and deep-seated ethnic and religious intolerance (Adeosun, 2014; Kolawole, 2011; Oni, 2014; Tinubu, 2009).

Since returning to democracy in 1999, Nigeria has encountered increasingly severe challenges that threaten its democratic stability. Despite a history marred by military coups (1966-1979; 1983-1999), the hoped-for resistance against centrifugal forces has been insufficient to solidify democratic processes. Nigeria has witnessed seven democratic transitions (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023), each introducing unique and interrelated challenges. The 1999 general elections were the first elections after the long military rule. Although not adjudged free and fair, it was accepted despite being settled by the Supreme Court. The political landscape was dominated by former military leaders, setting a precedent that continued with intense electoral contests involving two retired Generals and former Heads of State in 2003: General Olusegun Obasanjo the incumbent President, and General Muhammadu Buhari. Subsequent elections in 2007 and 2011 were plagued by violence, electoral malpractices, ballot snatching, and the introduction of "do or die" political culture allegedly by President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2007. The 2007 and 2011 elections were adjudged by local and international observers as far from being credible. Although the 2015 elections were less violent and saw the defeat of the incumbent President and ruling party-prompting national and international hope for consolidation. Unfortunately, it introduced and established the culture of vote buying as a trending norm in Nigeria's electoral process to date. The 2019 elections demonstrated a resurgence of political violence, manipulation, vote buying, and corrupt practices that left a disheartening impression on observers both domestically and internationally. The 2019 President set a worse precedent for electioneering in the country. The subsequent gubernatorial elections in Bayelsa and Kogi states after the 2019 elections further highlighted the fragile state of Nigeria's democracy. The 2023 general elections were far from being free and fair by all democratic standards. The presidential election was rejected by the opposition contestants even after the verdict of the Supreme Court. The electoral empire INEC, the security agencies, and the judicial were alleged to have contributed to the abysmal outcomes of the 2023 elections. The elections eroded the gains of the 2015 elections and dashed hopes for democratic consolidation in the country. Until the issues raised by domestic and international observers are addressed and backed with an honest political will to ensure electoral reforms are implemented, the nation's quest for democratic consolidation will remain a mirage.

Regrettably, Nigerian leaders and citizens have not effectively learned from past errors. After over two decades of democratic experience, the nation continues to face grave challenges that threaten both the quality of its democracy and the cohesion of the state. These ten points below summarize the major obstacles amongst others facing Nigeria's democratic consolidation, each interconnected and contributing to the complexity of establishing a stable and effective democratic governance.

1. **Weak Public Institutions and Electoral Malpractice:** Public institutions such as INEC, the police, and the military often exhibit political partisanship, undermining the neutrality required for free and fair elections. This issue is compounded by widespread electoral malpractices including vote-buying, rigging, and ballot box snatching.
2. **Lack of Political Ideology and Godfatherism:** The absence of strong political ideologies and the prevalence of godfatherism disrupt democratic processes, where political offices are often secured not through merit but through loyalty to influential figures.
3. **Disregard for the Rule of Law and Corruption:** There is a significant disregard for the rule of law, seen in the illegal detention of opponents and pervasive corruption that affects all levels of the electoral process, including the judiciary, thereby hampering democratic consolidation.
4. **Political Desperation and Money Politics:** The political arena is marred by desperation to gain or hold onto power at all costs, often through financial means, which skews the democratic process and undermines the integrity of elections.
5. **Weak Political Opposition and Apathy:** The strength of political opposition is crucial for democracy, yet it is undermined by frequent defections and general apathy among voters, exacerbated by a lack of trust in the electoral process and ongoing political violence.
6. **Abuse of State Resources and Lack of Party Supremacy:** The misuse of state resources for election campaigns and the diminishing supremacy of political parties contribute to undemocratic practices and reduce accountability in governance.
7. **Insecurity and Ethno-Religious Conflicts:** Persistent insecurity and ethno-religious conflicts severely impact the democratic environment, making it difficult to conduct peaceful and fair elections.
8. **Lack of Separation of Powers:** The blurring of separation of powers, with the executive overreaching its influence over the legislature and judiciary, undermines the checks and balances necessary for a functional democracy.
9. **Judicial Challenges:** The judiciary's failure to remain neutral and the problematic securing of biased judgments undermine its role as an impartial arbitrator in the democratic system.
10. **National Unity and Inclusivity:** Deep ethnic and religious divisions challenge the consolidation of democracy, highlighting the need for increased efforts towards inclusivity and unity to foster a stronger democratic state.

## **Recommendations for Democratic Sustenance and Consolidation in Nigeria**

1. **Learning from History:** The political elite must acknowledge past failures, notably those that triggered military coups, such as political violence, electoral rigging, and ethnoreligious crises, and implement measures to prevent these from recurring.
2. **Electoral Independence:** National and state electoral bodies, including INEC and SIECs, should operate independently without political interference. They should be well-funded and equipped, potentially incorporating e-voting to enhance election integrity and efficiency.



3. **Curbing Monetization:** The entire electoral process should move away from the high costs associated with party tickets, campaign funding, and vote buying, to emphasize democratic integrity over financial power.
  4. **Transparency in Political Remuneration:** The earnings of political office holders should be significantly reduced and made public to ensure accountability and reduce corruption incentives.
  5. **Constitutionalism:** Strong adherence to the rule of law is essential, with all government branches, including the executive, legislature, and judiciary, maintaining independence and enforcing checks and balances rigorously.
  6. **Strengthening Civil Society and Media:** These entities should remain vigilant, objective, and free from governmental suppression to effectively fulfill their roles in the democratic process.
  7. **Judicial Independence:** The judiciary should maintain its autonomy and exhibit impartiality and bravery in its judgments, collaborating with other government branches without yielding to pressure.
  8. **Reforming Security Involvement in Elections:** Security forces, including military and paramilitary units, should be strictly professional, apolitical, and focused on protecting electoral integrity rather than engaging in partisan activities. The direct involvement of the military in electoral processes should be discouraged, focusing instead on national defense.
- These recommendations aim to address the fundamental challenges facing Nigeria's democratic processes and are crucial for achieving lasting democratic consolidation.

## References

- Adejumobi, S. (2006). *\*Elections in Africa: A fading shadow of democracy\**. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com>
- Ademola, A. (2011). Endangering good governance for sustainable democracy: The continuing struggle against corruption in Nigeria. *\*Journal of Research on Peace, Gender and Development, 1\*(11)*.
- Adeniyi, P. (2010). *\*Nigeria: Yesterday, today and tomorrow\**. Ibadan, Nigeria: Daily Graphics Nigeria Ltd.
- Adeosun, A. B. (2014). Democracy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Issues and challenges. *\*IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 19\*(10)*. Retrieved from [www.iosrjournals.org](http://www.iosrjournals.org)
- Anifowose, R. (1999). Constitutions and constitutionalism. In R. Anifowose & F. Enemuo (Eds.), *\*Elements of Politics\** (pp. 65-85). Lagos, Nigeria: Malthouse Press Ltd.
- Ake, C. (1996). *\*Democracy and development in Africa\**. Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books Ltd.

Ball, K. (1989). \*Liberal democracy\*. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Bentham, J., & Mill, J. S. (2009). The history of utilitarianism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), \*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\*. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu>

Bernard, C. (2003). \*Democracy: A very short introduction\*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.amazon.com>

Dahl, R. A. (1989). \*Democracy and its critics\*. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Etebom, J. M. (2015). Retired military officers and democratic process in Nigeria (Unpublished master's thesis). Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

Etebom, J. M. (2022). The characteristics and complexity of Nigerian security challenges: The need for a new strategy. \*TheJournalish: Social and Government, 3\*(1).

Huntington, S. P. (1991). \*The third wave: Democracy in the twentieth century\*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Jaga, A. M. (2007). \*Democracy, good governance and development in Nigeria\*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books Ltd.

Kolawole, D. (2011). Nigeria: The struggle for democratic consolidation in a post-colonial state. In A. A. Agagu & R. F. Ola (Eds.), \*Development Agenda of the Nigeria State\* (pp. 50-78). Akure, Nigeria: Lord Keynes Publishing Company.

Lindberg, S. I. (2006). The surprising significance of Africa elections. \*Journal of Democracy, 17\*(1), 139-151.

Lipset, S. M. (1959). \*The political man\*. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Oni, E. O. (2014). The challenges of democratic consolidation in Nigeria: 1999-2007. \*International Journal of Politics and Good Governance, 5\*(5).

Ola, R. F., & Tonwe, D. A. (2003). \*Local government administration and local government in Nigeria\*. Lagos, Nigeria: Trust Publishing.

Palma, D. G. (1990). \*To craft democracies: An essay on democratic transitions\*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Retrieved from <http://www.ucpress.edu>

Popper, K. (1988). \*The open society and its enemies revisited\*. Retrieved from <http://economist.com>

Tinubu, A. (2009). \*Democratic consolidation in Nigeria: Issues, challenges and prospects\*. Retrieved from <http://burningprt.com>

Zaira, R. J. N. (2013). \*Nigeria military in politics: 1966 to 2011\*. Kaduna, Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello University Press Ltd.