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Nijerya'da Sömürge Sonrası Devletin Oluşumu ve Yönetişim Krizi

Post-colonial State Formation and the Crisis of Governance in Nigeria

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Nijerya'da post-kolonyal dönemle birlikte şekillenen devlet yapılanmasının, günümüzdeki yönetim krizleriyle nasıl ilişkilendirilebileceğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. 1960'ta bağımsızlığını kazanan Nijerya, sömürge döneminden devraldığı idari yapıların kalıplarıyla yeni bir devlet inşa etmeye çalışmış; ancak bu yapıların yerel toplumsal dinamiklerle uyuşmaması, yönetsel süreklilik ve kamu hizmetlerinin etkinliği açısından ciddi kırılmalara yol açmıştır. Bu bağlamda çalışmanın temel amacı, kolonyal yönetim tarzının, devlet kapasitesi ve hükümet performansı üzerindeki uzun vadeli etkilerini analiz etmektir. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemi benimsenmiş; karşılaştırmalı siyasal analiz çerçevesinde resmi belgeler ve ikincil literatürden yararlanılmıştır. Sonuçlar, Nijerya devletinin şiddet tekeli tesis etmekte, kamu hizmetlerini etkin biçimde sunmakta ve siyasal meşruiyet üretmekte ciddi zorluklar yaşadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Kolonyal yönetim anlayışının devam eden etkileri, etnik bölünmüşlük, bürokratik parçalanma ve siyasi patronaj sistemleriyle birleştiğinde, yönetsel kırılma daha da artırmaktadır. Çalışma, demokratikleşme süreçlerinin derinleştirilmesi, yerel yönetimlerin güçlendirilmesi ve kurumların şeffaf, kapsayıcı ve hesap verebilir şekilde yeniden yapılandırılmasının yönetim krizinin aşılmasında temel rol oynayabileceğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Post-kolonyal devlet yapısı, Yönetişim krizi, Devlet kapasitesi, Kurumsal miras, Siyasal meşruiyet.

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between post-colonial state formation and the persistent crisis of governance in Nigeria. Gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria attempted to construct a modern state upon the administrative legacies inherited from British colonial rule. However, these externally imposed structures failed to align with the country's complex socio-political realities, resulting in systemic fragmentation and weak institutional performance. The central aim of the study is to examine how the colonial mode of governance continues to shape state capacity and governmental effectiveness in contemporary Nigeria. A qualitative research approach was adopted, utilizing comparative political analysis. Data were gathered through official documents

and academic literature. The findings reveal that the Nigerian state faces major challenges in asserting monopoly over the use of force, delivering public services, and generating political legitimacy. The colonial legacy – marked by indirect rule, centralized administration, and exclusionary governance – has fostered an environment of ethnic division, bureaucratic incoherence, and clientelist political networks. These conditions have exacerbated institutional fragility and limited the prospects for effective governance. The study concludes that addressing the crisis of governance requires a multidimensional approach involving deepened democratization, decentralization of power, and institutional reform toward transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability.

Keywords: Post-colonial state formation, Governance crisis, State capacity, Institutional legacy, Political legitimacy.

Introduction

One of the earliest European encounters with present-day Nigeria occurred in 1472 when Portuguese explorers, led by Ruy de Sequeira, reached Benin during Oba Ewuare's rule. However, it wasn't until 1486 – following an invitation from Oba Ozolua – that Joao Aveiro's expedition successfully traveled inland from the coast to the Benin Kingdom. Aveiro persuaded the Oba to permit Portuguese Christian missionaries to establish a church presence in the empire. Trade relations between Benin and Portugal soon flourished (Koger, 2022).

In 1514, Oba Esigie sent an envoy to Portugal, and a year later, Portuguese missionaries arrived to support the development of churches and schools. Some historians even note that by 1600, the neighboring Itsekiri community sent youths to Portugal for education. It is widely believed that West African rulers sent their children to Europe primarily to gain insights into European science, technology, philosophy, and culture – knowledge that could improve their interactions with European traders. Eventually, coastal West African communities began exchanging slaves for imported foodstuffs, firearms, and luxury items produced in Europe (Asakitikpi et al., 2025: 31).

Nigeria was selected as the primary case study of this research due to its distinctive structural characteristics and its representative significance for understanding post-colonial state formation in Africa. As the most populous

country on the continent and one of the largest economies in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria occupies a central position in regional political economy and geopolitics. At the same time, the country exhibits one of the highest levels of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity in Africa, with a historically fragmented socio-political landscape. These features make Nigeria an analytically valuable case for examining how colonial administrative structures interact with complex societal configurations in shaping post-colonial governance outcomes. Furthermore, Nigeria's state formation process was profoundly shaped by the British system of indirect rule, which institutionalized ethnic segmentation, centralized administrative authority, and patrimonial political networks that continue to influence contemporary governance patterns. For these reasons, Nigeria provides a particularly instructive empirical setting for analyzing the long-term effects of colonial governance models on state capacity, legitimacy, and institutional performance in post-colonial contexts.

Emancipatory forms of ethnicity possess a crucial dimension that deserves closer attention. When such expressions highlight the marginalization or injustices experienced by specific groups—especially those resulting from state actions, policies, or negligence—they function as informal mechanisms of accountability. Ethnic organizations and intermediaries that champion these causes often take on this role by default. This is particularly evident in countries like Nigeria, where the state frequently recognizes ethnic and regional associations as legitimate voices of their communities. When grievances are clearly expressed—especially those linked to poor governance or systemic failures—they tend to enter the public discourse and policy agenda. In the Nigerian context, it is quite common for state authorities to consult or engage ethnic, traditional, regional, and religious leaders to explain controversial decisions, request advice, or announce reconciliatory initiatives on matters touching ethnic or communal sensitivities (Adebanwi, 2023: 40).

The formation of modern states in post-colonial societies remains a central concern in political science and development studies. Nowhere is this more evident than in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of its most resource-rich (Joseph, 1987). Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1960, Nigeria has struggled to forge a cohesive and legitimate political order (Osaghae, 1998). Despite repeated efforts at democratic transition, pub-

lic sector reform, and national integration, the Nigerian state continues to exhibit persistent symptoms of institutional fragility, elite domi-nation, and governance breakdown (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2013).

This study explores the complex historical relationship between post-colonial state formation and the ongoing crisis of governance in Nigeria. It argues that the colonial state's administrative legacies – characterized by indirect rule, centralized extraction, and ethnic manipulation – created a weak foundation for post-independence state-building. These inherited structures were not dismantled or restructured following decolonization; instead, they were adapted and appropriated by domestic elites to sustain patron-client networks and prebendal politics (Bayart, 1993; Chabal & Daloz, 1999).

Over the past two decades, Nigeria has experienced a troubling escalation in the intertwined problems of insecurity and corruption, which have appeared in diverse and increasingly complex forms. Although the country possesses a range of legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms intended to confront these issues, their damaging consequences persist and continue to challenge governance structures (Turaki et al., 2024: 556-558). Within the crisis of governance section of the study, these dynamics are examined with particular attention to security fragmentation, political clientelism, the corruption complex, and the gradual erosion of institutional capacity. As a result, Nigeria's post-colonial state emerged as a hybrid formation: formally sovereign and constitutionally democratic, but substantively characterized by exclusion, fragmentation, and institutional incoherence (Osaghae, 1998: 12-15).

Methodologically; the study is situated within a theoretical framework grounded in historical institutionalism, which emphasizes path dependency, critical junctures, and the long-term consequences of institutional design (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Accordingly, the study asks how colonial administrative structures have influenced the development of governance institutions and state capacity in post-colonial Nigeria. The analysis draws on qualitative examination of official policy documents, historical records, academic literature to trace the continuity between colonial governance practices and contemporary institutional outcomes. It also draws from comparative African state theory, particularly the concept of the "hollow state" or "ghost state" – a state

which exists in form but lacks functional capacity (Englebert, 2000: 45-47). To substantiate its claims, the study utilizes a qualitative methodology that includes a close reading of official documents such as the 1999 Constitution, reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and data from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics. In addition, secondary literature is analyzed alongside focused case studies, notably the Niger Delta insurgency, the Boko Haram crisis in the northeast, and federalism in Lagos State.

Within the context of Nigeria and its governance crisis, it has long been argued that the Nigerian state, much like many states across Africa and the broader developing world, has consistently underperformed because of insufficient state capacity to cope with the growing complexities of modern governance. Political leadership and governance practices in Nigeria have frequently been shaped by self interest and primordial loyalties that tend to override broader public concerns. As a consequence, the state has struggled to fulfill fundamental responsibilities, particularly in safeguarding lives and property, strengthening the rule of law, and providing strategic and visionary leadership. The character and conduct of political elites therefore largely explain the limitations of the Nigerian state in achieving effective governance (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019: 1). At the same time, mechanisms such as ethnic quota systems, which were originally intended to promote inclusivity, have often been manipulated by dominant groups. As a result, the governance structure has developed into an elite centered and militarized system of ethnic power sharing, a pattern that has contributed to recurring civil conflicts and the persistent fragility of the state (Asmorowati & Ceesay, 2025: 256).

Nigeria's governance crisis is not merely a contemporary problem of leadership failure or corruption—it is the cumulative result of structural distortions embedded in the state at its point of origin. This structural inheritance continues to limit the effectiveness of public administration, weaken the rule of law, and delegitimize democratic institutions. By interrogating the colonial roots of Nigeria's governance challenges, this study seeks to offer a historically grounded and politically nuanced understanding of why institutional reform and development have remained so elusive in Nigeria despite decades of effort and international engagement.

Historical Foundations of the Nigerian State

The historical foundations of the Nigerian state are deeply embedded in the logic of colonialism, characterized by conquest, economic exploitation, administrative experimentation, and political fragmentation. This section explores the key developments that defined Nigeria's colonial formation, focusing on the institutional architecture laid by British authorities, the mechanisms of indirect rule, and the contradictions of amalgamation. These colonial legacies—rather than being dismantled after independence—were reappropriated by domestic elites, shaping the trajectory of state-building in postcolonial Nigeria (Mbadiwe & ItaEkong, 279-285).

Before British colonization, the area known today as Nigeria was home to diverse political entities, including centralized kingdoms like the Oyo Empire, Sokoto Caliphate, and Benin Kingdom, as well as decentralized communities such as the Igbo segmentary societies (Afigbo, 1972). These polities had distinct administrative systems, legal cultures, and economic structures. The British conquest, beginning in the mid-19th century, systematically disrupted these indigenous orders. British missionaries, traders, and colonial officers justified intervention through the language of civilization and commerce, but their ultimate aim was the consolidation of imperial control (Tamuno, 1972).

The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 provided the international legitimacy for European powers to stake claims in Africa. Britain's claims over Nigeria materialized in three main phases: the annexation of Lagos in 1861, the formation of the Oil Rivers Protectorate (later Niger Coast Protectorate) in 1893, and the establishment of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in the early 20th century. Each of these units was governed with little consideration for the socio-cultural realities on the ground, thus planting the seeds of future disunity (Asiwaju, 1984).

The most critical turning point in the colonial creation of Nigeria came with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 under Governor Frederick Lugard. Lugard believed that a unified administrative system would facilitate efficient resource extraction and reduce the costs of colonial governance (Lugard, 1922). However, amalgamation was not driven by a vision of national unity or democratic governance; it was a bureauc-

matic and economic maneuver aimed at balancing the budget of the less profitable North by merging it with the more commercially viable South (Coleman, 1958).

Lugard's system of indirect rule, particularly institutionalized in the North, relied on existing traditional rulers to administer colonial policies. While this method provided a semblance of local legitimacy, it fundamentally distorted indigenous institutions by subordinating them to British interests. In the South, where such centralized authority was lacking, British officers created warrant chiefs, thereby inventing new power structures alien to local societies (Ikime, 1977: 68-72). This asymmetrical application of indirect rule reinforced regional disparities and created administrative dualities that would haunt post-independence Nigeria.

The colonial state was designed as a centralized, extractive apparatus. Its administrative priorities centered on taxation, export production (particularly palm oil and later petroleum), and infrastructural development aimed at linking the hinterlands to export ports (Olukoju, 1996). Education, health, and social services were secondary concerns and were often delegated to missionary societies. These developmental imbalances created a legacy of spatial inequality and elite concentration in coastal cities like Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Calabar.

The colonial administration established a legal system rooted in British common law but adapted to the colonial context through ordinances, native courts, and customary law integration (Alli, 2003). The result was a fragmented legal order, wherein different regions and communities operated under distinct judicial systems. This legal pluralism persists in contemporary Nigeria, complicating efforts at national integration and access to justice.

The colonial bureaucracy, though limited in scope, introduced centralized mechanisms of control such as the civil service, police, and judiciary. However, these institutions were primarily designed to serve colonial interests, not to build democratic or developmental capacity. They were hierarchically structured, under-resourced, and alienated from local populations (Mamdani, 1996). The resulting "bifurcated state" (Mamdani, 1996: 18) functi-

oned through both civic and customary channels, a duality that reproduced authoritarian rule under the guise of tradition.

Within the context of this study, an example from another field may be considered; education under colonial rule was another arena of inequality. The British prioritized missionary education in the South, resulting in higher literacy and administrative representation among southern Nigerians. In contrast, the North was largely excluded from formal education due to fears of disrupting Islamic structures and authority (Dudley, 1982: 47). This regional educational gap translated into unequal political participation, with southern elites dominating the nationalist movement and civil service by the time of independence.

British authorities initiated constitutional reforms aimed at gradual African participation in governance, starting with the Clifford Constitution of 1922. However, these reforms were superficial and largely intended to maintain colonial control while pacifying demands for representation (Sklar, 1963). The Richards (1946), Macpherson (1951), and Lyttleton (1954) constitutions incrementally devolved powers to regional governments but failed to create a strong federal framework. Instead, these changes exacerbated ethnic and regional competition, especially among the Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West, and Igbo in the East (Diamond, 1988).

By the time of independence in 1960, Nigeria was a deeply fragmented polity with fragile national institutions and entrenched regional identities. The nationalist leaders – while advocating for unity – were themselves embedded in ethnic and regional loyalties. The first republic (1960–1966) collapsed under the weight of these contradictions, leading to military coups and a civil war that further exposed the structural weaknesses of the Nigerian state (Osuntokun, 1979).

The fiscal structure established by the British was based on revenue extraction and central redistribution. The allocation of resources was often opaque and discretionary, favoring regions that aligned with colonial priorities. This pattern continued after independence, where oil revenues – controlled by the federal government – became the primary source of national wealth. The legacy of centralized economic control has persisted, with signifi-

cant implications for regional autonomy and fiscal accountability (Ekpo & Ndebbio, 1998).

The Nigerian state today retains many features of its colonial ancestor: centralized authority, limited state capacity, uneven development, and weak legitimacy. Understanding these structural continuities is essential for diagnosing the root causes of Nigeria's governance crisis and for imagining alternative trajectories of state-building grounded in democratic inclusion and institutional reform.

The Crisis of Governance: Core Dimensions

The governance crisis in Nigeria is a deeply entrenched and multifaceted phenomenon that manifests in institutional weakness, endemic corruption, poor public service delivery, and a pervasive legitimacy deficit. This section explores the core dimensions of this crisis, focusing on institutional erosion, the corruption complex, political clientelism, and security fragmentation. It argues that Nigeria's governance failures are not episodic or sectoral but systemic, rooted in the structural contradictions of its post-colonial state formation and elite capture of state institutions.

A central feature of Nigeria's governance crisis is the persistent weakness of state institutions. Despite repeated efforts at reform, the civil service, judiciary, police, and other state agencies continue to suffer from low capacity, politicization, and limited public trust (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). The Nigerian state has historically struggled to implement policies effectively, due in part to poorly trained personnel, inadequate infrastructure, and overlapping bureaucratic mandates (Ihonvbere, 1996).

Nigeria's public administration system encompasses both formal institutions, such as ministries and governmental departments, and informal structures including patronage networks. Over time, these arrangements have been increasingly characterized by inefficiency, weak accountability, and widespread corruption, as many public officials have used their positions for personal gain. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced recurring political instability, economic mismanagement, and entrenched corruption within state institutions. The Nigerian state has passed through successive military regimes and democratic transitions, with military rule between 1966 and 1999

particularly enabling the misuse of national resources by political elites. Following the restoration of democratic governance in 1999, significant reforms were initiated to strengthen transparency and accountability within public administration. As part of these efforts, specialized anti corruption agencies such as the EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission) and ICPC (Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission) were established to investigate and prosecute corrupt practices. Despite these initiatives, major challenges persist within Nigeria's complex political and institutional environment, indicating the continued need for systemic reforms aimed at strengthening institutional capacity, improving coordination among stakeholders, and ensuring the independence of anti corruption bodies (Okolie & Egbon, 2025: 251-252).

This institutional weakness has been particularly evident in service delivery sectors such as education and healthcare. The Human Development Report (UNDP, 2020) indicates that Nigeria ranks among the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa in public health indicators, despite its status as Africa's largest economy. The inability of the state to guarantee basic social services undermines its legitimacy and deepens social exclusion.

Before turning to the role of federalism in shaping Nigeria's governance structure, it is important to briefly revisit the issue of corruption, which has already been addressed in earlier sections of this study as a central element of the country's governance crisis. The persistence of corruption continues to undermine institutional effectiveness, weaken public trust, and distort policy implementation across multiple levels of government. In the Nigerian context, corruption is not merely an administrative problem but a systemic phenomenon closely intertwined with political patronage networks and weak institutional oversight (Smith, 2007: 128-129). Recognizing this continuity helps situate the discussion that follows, as the structural dynamics of federalism intersect with these entrenched governance challenges and shape the broader patterns of political accountability and state capacity in Nigeria (Suberu, 2001: 42-44).

Moreover, federalism in Nigeria has created a fragmented administrative structure, where subnational governments are financially dependent on the federal center but lack real autonomy (Khemani, 2006). This has led to a lack

of coordination, duplication of efforts, and competition among tiers of government, further eroding institutional coherence.

Corruption in Nigeria is not simply a deviation from normative governance but a systemic mode of rule. It is embedded in everyday bureaucratic practice and elite accumulation strategies. Transparency International consistently ranks Nigeria among the most corrupt countries globally, and anti-corruption campaigns have yielded limited success due to selective enforcement and political shielding (Uzochukwu, 2015).

The corruption complex in Nigeria is sustained through elaborate networks of rent-seeking, procurement fraud, and illicit financial flows. The 2021 Global Financial Integrity report estimated that over \$15 billion is lost annually through trade misinvoicing and other illegal capital movements (GFI, 2021). High-profile scandals such as the Dasuki arms procurement case and fuel subsidy frauds reveal the depth of elite complicity in state plunder (Premium Times, 2016).

Critically, anti-corruption institutions such as the EFCC and ICPC are often politicized, underfunded, and lack prosecutorial independence. The result is a cyclical pattern of scapegoating, impunity, and moral cynicism (Smith, 2007: 133–136).

The Nigerian political system operates on the logic of prebendalism—a term coined by Richard Joseph to describe the practice of appropriating public office for personal or factional benefit (Joseph, 2014). Political loyalty is often rewarded with appointments, contracts, and discretionary funding, rather than competence or merit. Elections become high-stakes contests for control of the state apparatus and its associated rents (Omotola, 2010).

Political parties in Nigeria lack ideological coherence and are primarily vehicles for elite negotiation. Party switching, known as “political cross-carpeting,” is common, and internal party democracy is weak (Olorunmola, 2017). This weakens the electoral system and undermines the accountability link between citizens and representatives.

Furthermore, vote buying, electoral violence, and judicial manipulation are recurrent features of Nigeria’s electoral landscape. The 2019 general electi-

ons, for example, witnessed widespread reports of ballot box snatching, voter suppression, and the deployment of security forces to intimidate opposition strongholds (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2019).

Perhaps the most visible symptom of Nigeria's governance crisis is the state's inability to guarantee physical security. The country faces multiple overlapping security threats, including the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, armed banditry in the northwest, secessionist agitations in the southeast, and farmer-herder conflicts across the Middle Belt (Campbell & Harwood, 2018).

The rise of non-state armed actors and vigilante groups reflects the erosion of state monopoly on violence. In Nigeria, the insurgency carried out by Boko Haram has produced devastating consequences, resulting in extensive loss of life, destruction of property, and the severe disruption of economic activity. The conflict associated with Boko Haram has therefore had profoundly damaging effects, not only on Africa's most populous country but also on its broader socio economic stability. At the same time, persistent acts of terror continue to affect numerous locations across Northern Nigeria (Akowe, 2024: 1). The Nigerian military, while heavily funded, is overstretched and plagued by corruption, poor morale, and accusations of human rights abuses (Amnesty International, 2020). In many areas, local populations have turned to self-help security mechanisms, including ethnic militias and informal policing, further fragmenting the state's authority.

The cumulative impact of institutional weakness, corruption, clientelism, and insecurity is a severe legitimacy deficit. Public trust in government remains extremely low. According to the 2022 Afrobarometer survey, only 29% of Nigerians express confidence in the presidency, and less than 20% trust the police and judiciary (Afrobarometer, 2022).

Civil society, while vibrant in sectors such as media and human rights advocacy, remains constrained by legal restrictions, co-optation, and funding challenges. Youth movements like #EndSARS have challenged police brutality and state repression but have been met with violent crackdowns, indicating a narrowing space for democratic dissent (Makinde, 2021).

The legitimacy crisis is not merely institutional but moral. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) argue, in many postcolonial states, the state is perceived not as a provider of order and welfare, but as a site of dispossession and predation. In Nigeria, this perception is exacerbated by the elite's conspicuous consumption and the stark contrast with mass poverty.

Discussion: Colonial Legacies in Contemporary Governance

The legacy of colonialism in Nigeria is not merely a historical artifact but a living structure that shapes governance, political culture, and economic practices in the present. While formal colonial rule ended in 1960, the institutions, norms, and administrative logics established during British rule persist in modified forms, constraining state transformation and democratic deepening. This discussion synthesizes how these colonial legacies manifest across key domains: bureaucratic structure, legal pluralism, federalism, interethnic relations, extractive political economy, and elite behavior. Drawing on both primary sources and contemporary research, this section offers a comprehensive assessment of the colonial inheritance and its implications for reform and political development in Nigeria.

Furthermore, economic and social inequalities in Nigeria should also be mentioned; district-level inequalities remain highly persistent, largely due to the legacy of Christian missionary activities in providing social services, including schools and general infrastructure. These inequalities are influenced by the capacity for resilience, the allocation of resources, and the resulting human capital implications from differential access to education, which in turn shape the long-term persistence of economic disparities. The spatial distribution of various types of schools can further produce economic inequalities across regions (Agwu, 2022: 1, 5-6). Disparities among individuals and groups often extend into broader economic and social opportunities. Prior research on inequalities of opportunity in Nigeria has traced their roots back to the colonial period (Cogneau & Mesple-Soms, 2008).

One of the most profound colonial legacies is the dysfunctional nature of the Nigerian state apparatus. The colonial bureaucracy, designed to serve imperial interests, was hierarchical, extractive, and largely unaccountable to the local population. Despite reforms and localization in the post-independence

era, the civil service retains these foundational traits. As Ekeh (1975) famously argued in his theory of the “two publics,” the postcolonial African state is divided between a civic public—associated with colonial authority and seen as morally illegitimate—and a primordial public—linked to ethnic and kin-based solidarities and viewed as morally legitimate. This bifurcation undermines national identity and breeds corruption, as public office is used to serve communal rather than national interests (Ekeh, 1975: 108).

Furthermore, British colonial rule institutionalized centralized decision-making and personalized governance. The indirect rule system, while appearing to preserve traditional authority, in fact created authoritarian structures, particularly in Northern Nigeria. Chiefs and emirs were transformed into extensions of colonial power, eroding their traditional legitimacy. In postcolonial Nigeria, these personalized forms of authority have been retained, with governors, ministers, and presidents exercising enormous discretionary power over state resources and appointments (Sklar, 2004). This personalization weakens bureaucratic institutions and enables neopatrimonial governance.

British colonialism introduced a tripartite legal system in Nigeria, combining English common law, Islamic law (Sharia), and customary law. This legal pluralism, while aimed at accommodating diverse communities, created a fragmented legal landscape. Each region developed distinct judicial institutions, with uneven levels of professionalism, access, and enforcement. In contemporary Nigeria, this pluralism persists and creates confusion in adjudication, forum shopping, and legal contradictions (Oba, 2002). For instance, the reintroduction of full Sharia law in 12 northern states since 1999 has sparked tensions over religious freedom, human rights, and constitutional supremacy. The judiciary is further weakened by corruption, political interference, and poor funding. The persistence of legal pluralism without harmonization undermines the rule of law and entrenches inequality before the law (Nwauche, 2011).

While federalism is often portrayed as a solution to Nigeria’s diversity, it originated as a colonial strategy of divide and rule. The Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 created three regions—North, West, and East—each with considerable

autonomy. However, the boundaries of these regions were arbitrarily drawn and largely ignored ethnic and cultural continuities. This administrative division institutionalized regionalism and fostered identity-based politics (Suberu, 2001).

Post-independence federalism in Nigeria has evolved into a highly centralized structure in practice, with the federal government controlling over 50% of national revenues. Yet, demands for resource control, state creation, and political inclusion remain high. The tension between centralization and decentralization, rooted in colonial administrative logic, continues to fuel political instability and intergroup competition (Osaghae, 1998).

For comparison, Cameroon, another federal country in the region, faces similar problems to Nigeria. Within the Central African sub-region, Cameroon stands out as a country confronted with numerous challenges encompassing economic, social, political, and diversity related conflicts. Among these difficulties are the terrorist operations of Boko Haram in the northern regions, the refugee crisis in the east resulting from people fleeing the conflict in the Central African Republic, and most notably the issue widely referred to as the Anglophone problem. Collectively, these developments have posed serious risks to Cameroon's national unity and territorial integrity. Of these challenges, the Anglophone problem has been the most enduring and severe, placing considerable pressure on the state's human, material, and financial resources while threatening the cohesion of the country. Historically, the origins of this issue can be traced back to the Fomuban constitutional conference of 1961 and the Federal Constitution that formalized the unification of the Republic of Cameroon with the former British Southern Cameroons. According to V G Ngoh, the crisis emerged from the inability of successive Cameroonian governments to uphold and respect the provisions of the Federal Constitution (Victor, 2019: 385). Since that period, subsequent administrations have frequently disregarded the matter and even denied the existence of an "Anglophone problem," which has resulted in the absence of sufficient and effective measures to resolve it (Dzelamonyuy & Akon, 2024: 21).

Colonial rule played a pivotal role in transforming fluid precolonial identities into rigid ethnic categories. The British, in their effort to simplify admi-

nistration, classified populations into “tribes” and promoted ethnic labels through censuses, indirect rule, and education (Lentz, 1995). The development of regional parties in the 1940s and 1950s—the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG), and National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC)—was facilitated by these colonial-era divisions.

Today, ethnicity remains the dominant axis of political mobilization. Appointments, elections, and even infrastructural allocation are often determined by ethnic calculations rather than merit. The federal character principle, introduced to ensure ethnic representation in state institutions, has paradoxically reinforced ethnic consciousness and mediocrity (Mustapha, 2007). The colonial invention of ethnicity, institutionalized in postcolonial governance, continues to obstruct national integration.

Colonial economic policy in Nigeria was extractive and oriented towards resource exploitation for the benefit of the metropole. The emphasis was on export-oriented agriculture and later, petroleum extraction, with minimal re-investment in local industrialization. This economic logic created a dependent and externally oriented economy (Ake, 1981).

In the postcolonial period, this extractive structure has not been fundamentally transformed. Oil rents account for over 70% of government revenues, making the Nigerian state a classic rentier state (Karl, 1997). Rentierism undermines the development of a productive economy and decouples the state from society. Since government income is not primarily derived from taxation, rulers are less accountable to citizens, and governance becomes a game of rent distribution rather than service provision (Watts, 2004).

Moreover, the institutions managing oil wealth—such as the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC)—are opaque and prone to corruption. As Le Billon (2005) argues, in resource-rich states like Nigeria, natural wealth often fuels conflict, state capture, and violence. The Niger Delta insurgency and ongoing oil theft underscore the failure to address the colonial legacy of resource extraction without development.

Contemporary elites, especially in politics and business, often hail from families that benefited from colonial-era privileges. This continuity reinforces social stratification and limits upward mobility. Moreover, the educational

system remains underfunded, examination-centered, and disconnected from national development needs. The failure to reorient education away from colonial models has contributed to youth unemployment, skill mismatch, and social frustration (Adebayo, 2013).

Colonial administration did not foster democratic norms or participatory governance. Instead, it operated through decrees, censorship, and repression of dissent. The nationalist movement itself was often centralized around charismatic leaders who inherited authoritarian styles from their colonial predecessors (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

In postcolonial Nigeria, military regimes perpetuated this authoritarian legacy, ruling through decrees, suspending constitutions, and curtailing civil liberties. Even during civilian rule, democratic institutions remain weak, and executive dominance prevails. Political opposition is frequently harassed, media houses are intimidated, and security forces are deployed for partisan ends (Ibeanu, 2007).

Democratic backsliding and civic alienation are therefore not merely recent phenomena but are deeply rooted in the colonial culture of authoritarianism and state domination (Ake, 1996: 14). Unless this political culture is transformed, democratic consolidation will remain elusive.

The use of English as the official language, a colonial imposition, has created linguistic hierarchies and epistemic alienation. Most Nigerians are multilingual, yet official communication, education, and the legal system operate primarily in English. This not only limits participation but also marginalizes indigenous knowledge systems (Ogunyemi, 2025: 1-8).

Colonialism also shaped the social sciences in Nigeria. Early research prioritized ethnography, administration, and political order from the perspective of colonial governance. This epistemological legacy continues to influence curricula, methodologies, and academic priorities. Decolonizing knowledge production is essential for a genuine understanding of Nigeria's developmental challenges (Zezeza, 2006).

The colonial legacies embedded in Nigeria's governance structures are not immutable. They persist because they serve the interests of a rent-seeking

elite and are reproduced through institutional inertia and political culture. Addressing them requires deliberate reforms grounded in historical understanding and popular participation.

Key reform priorities include (Diamond, 2008: 239-262; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2020: 26-31):

- Civil service professionalization and depoliticization
- Judicial harmonization and access to justice
- Genuine fiscal federalism and decentralization
- Anti-corruption institutions with independence and capacity
- Educational reform focused on equity and relevance
- Promotion of inclusive nationalism beyond ethnic quotas
- Strengthening civic education and participatory governance.

As Mamdani (1996: 12, 26) warned, the postcolonial state cannot be democratized without confronting its colonial roots. In Nigeria, any sustainable governance reform must begin with this confrontation.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study has demonstrated that the governance challenges confronting Nigeria today are deeply embedded in the historical process of its state formation, particularly during and after British colonial rule. The colonial administration constructed a state designed primarily for extraction, repression, and control—not for democratic participation, citizen inclusion, or development. Following independence, Nigeria’s domestic elites inherited this administrative apparatus and reconfigured it to serve the logic of prebendalism, ethnic patronage, and elite accumulation (Joseph, 1987: 23-26; Bayart, 1993).

The failure to establish a truly inclusive, transparent, and accountable institutional architecture has rendered the Nigerian state structurally incapable of meeting the needs of its citizens. The persistence of parallel power structures—such as traditional authorities, militant networks, and religious movements—reflects the erosion of state legitimacy and the fragmentation of aut-

hority. The state has failed to maintain its monopoly over the use of force, particularly in regions like the Niger Delta and the northeast, where insurgent groups have established *de facto* governance (Forest, 2012). Similarly, corruption has become endemic, not merely as a behavioral deviation, but as a systemic feature of state practice. Institutions such as the police, judiciary, and civil service have been hollowed out by decades of politicization, underfunding, and elite capture (Chabal & Daloz, 1999: 68-70; Adebani, 2010).

Addressing Nigeria's governance crisis thus requires more than technocratic solutions or electoral reforms. In practical terms, this requires a set of targeted institutional reforms. First, strengthening the independence and capacity of anti corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission should be prioritized through legal safeguards and transparent oversight mechanisms. Second, improving fiscal federalism by granting sub national governments greater budgetary autonomy and accountability could enhance service delivery and reduce excessive centralization. Third, the development of reliable national identification and social registry systems would improve the targeting and transparency of public service provision. Finally, expanding civic education programs and institutionalizing participatory governance mechanisms at the local level could help rebuild trust between citizens and the state.

What is needed is a comprehensive political reengineering of the state itself—a rethinking of its legitimacy, functions, and relationship to society. This includes meaningful decentralization, genuine federalism, civic participation, and institutional reforms grounded in local realities. The lessons from Nigeria also speak to broader debates in comparative politics and development: namely, that post-colonial states cannot be fully understood or transformed without reckoning with their colonial genealogies.

In conclusion, Nigeria's experience offers both a warning and a possibility. It warns against the replication of external models of governance that fail to resonate with local contexts. Yet it also offers the possibility that through deliberate historical reckoning, participatory governance, and bottom-up institutional reform, the post-colonial state can be reclaimed and reimagined.

Such a transformation will not be easy, but it remains necessary – both for Nigeria and for the broader African continent.

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