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## **DEMOCRACY WITHOUT DEVELOPMENT: LEADERSHIP FAILURE AND NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC PARADOX**

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### | **ABSTRACT**

Nigeria's stalled development presents a daunting challenge for its democratic trajectory, especially when viewed from the angle of leadership. Decades after the restoration of civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria still grapples with underdevelopment as evidenced by endemic corruption, lack of institutional capacity, lack of accountability, and lack of visionary leadership. This study examines the nexus between democratic institutions and developmental performance as mediated by the quality of leadership.

### | **KEYWORDS**

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

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### **Abstract:-**

Nigeria's stalled development presents a daunting challenge for its democratic trajectory, especially when viewed from the angle of leadership. Decades after the restoration of civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria still grapples with underdevelopment as evidenced by endemic corruption, lack of institutional capacity, lack of accountability, and lack of visionary leadership. This study examines the nexus between democratic institutions and developmental performance as mediated by the quality of leadership. It adopts a qualitative research design that relies on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, archives, credible media, and internet sources. Thematically, the content analysis was adopted to classify secondary data into variables systematically. The study is rooted in the theoretical foundations of neo-patrimonialism, prebendalism, and public choice theory to provide a structured analytical model of democratic failure. The study argues that the cycle of elite capture, institutional weakness, and government inefficiencies impede democratic consolidation and national development in Nigeria. The findings show that democracy in Nigeria is more procedural and characterized by the ceremonial practice of elections, without necessarily translating into substantive governance and developmental benefits. The weaknesses of leadership, plagued by patrimonialism, corruption, and policy inconsistency, have caused a lack of trust in the government, political apathy, and elite domination. The study concludes that sustainable democratic consolidation requires a change in leadership, which is enhanced by institutional change, transparency, citizen involvement, and policy-based development.

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Accordingly, strengthening democratic institutions and developing leadership are inseparable from the process of realizing electoral democracy into practical socioeconomic development in Nigeria.

### **Introduction:-**

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

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

The expectations and hope that greeted the Fourth Republic concerning institutional strengthening, accountability, and socioeconomic growth remain unfulfilled more than 20 years later. The lack of trust in democratic institutions has been weakened by persistent leadership failures, corruption, inconsistency of policies, and impunity of the elites (Centre for Public Sector Governance, CPSG, 2025). Democracy in Nigeria is viewed as a hybrid regime, in which formal electoralism is present, but the governing institutions fail to deliver transparency, social justice, or any real developmental results. Similarly, Nigeria has been described as an illiberal democracy, which implies that the country is procedurally compliant with elections but fails in terms of governance performance (Norwegian Digital Learning Arena, 2025). This governance gap is supported by Nigeria's performance on the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) which shows that all its governance indicators in 2024 were worse than in 2014, with the critical indicators Security and Rule of Law with a score of 39.7 and Participation, Rights and Inclusion 47.9, both significantly lower than the continental average (Agi, 2024; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024). These indicate that Nigeria's democratic experiment has resulted in ritual processes, while neglecting substantive government, and reflect the argument of this study.

Meanwhile, the question of leadership is at the core of Nigeria's lack of democracy. According to Yagboyaju & Akinola (2019), political leadership in Nigeria has been more self-centred and patrimonial, that is, focused on the interests of narrow ethnic, regional, or personal interests rather than national development goals. This culture is reflected in poor institutions, systemic corruption, and a governance culture that condones impunity. The leadership inadequacies engender economic stagnation, unemployment, and structural decay, which render the country's democracy incapable of propelling national development. Leadership quality is a key factor in determining democratic performance in terms of development. Tzeng (2022) argues that inopportune actions, absence of vision, and insensitivity to the needs of citizens make democracy shallow or performative. While there is ceremonial conduct of elections, there is no substantive result for justice, accountability, or service delivery. Nigeria is such an example where, despite the existence of a formal government, gains of governance activities are exclusively enjoyed by the political elite. At the same time, a majority of the populace languishes in socioeconomic poverty.

As a result, this study questions the nexus between democratic failure and political leadership in Nigeria. It hypothesizes that democratic failure is not necessarily the consequence of the fragility of institutions or even the lack of functioning, but that it runs deep in the leadership culture of the political elite. The absence of substantive leadership is a setback for democratic consolidation and socioeconomic development. This study anticipates a relationship between the quality of leadership, democratic performance, and developmental outcomes. It also seeks to drive renewed debate on democracy and development

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in Africa by explaining the role of Nigerian leadership in its democratic structure. Thus, leadership quality can be viewed as a mediating variable. As long as democratic institutions offer space for participation, accountability, and representation, their ability to promote development is subject to visionary and effective exercise of political power

## **Literature Review:-**

### **Democracy and Development: Insights from Previous Studies:-**

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

The theoretical standpoint of the subject remains a paradox to Nigeria's empirical reality. The behaviour of successive elections since the restoration of civilian rule in 1999 has not led to any improvements in living standards, infrastructure, or institutional performance (Akinyetun, 2021). Madueke (2025) notes that even though democracy theoretically gives citizens the power to check leaders, democracy in Nigeria has been largely procedural, marked by electoral rituals with no substantial governance results. Political patronage, elite capture, and institutional fragility are some of the reasons why democratic systems have been extremely restricted in creating meaningful development. Such a discrepancy between democratic form and developmental performance reveals the shortcomings of a purely procedural definition of the concept of democracy. It highlights the need to consider the intervening factor of the quality of leadership.

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

### **Nigeria Leadership and Governance:-**

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

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

### **Bad Leadership and Democratic Erosion:-**

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

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

#### **Nexus of Democracy, Leadership and Development:-**

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

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

#### **Conceptual Framework:-**

##### **Democracy, Leadership, and the Paradox of Democratic Failure in Nigeria:-**

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

##### **Democracy: Between Popular Sovereignty and Procedural Formalism:-**

Democracy is etymologically related to *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule), meaning that democracy is a rule by the people on behalf of the people (Boryczka, 2008). Traditionally, classical Athens was an example of direct democracy where people took part in the communal decision-making process themselves. Contemporary states are mainly representative democracies, whereby representatives of the citizens are elected to represent the people in their interactions with the state machinery (Boryczka, 2008). Liberal democratic theory highlights that democracy goes beyond periodic elections. It includes political pluralism, rule of law, institutional accountability, civil liberties, and minority rights protection (Oyigebe& Yakubu, 2023). Substantive democracy is achieved once these principles are transformed into concrete realities: social justice, inclusion, equitable distribution of resources, and better citizen welfare (Zilla, 2022). In Nigeria, democracy has been procedural.

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Although elections are conducted more or less on a regular basis, there are systemic flaws in the system, including elite capture, institutional vulnerability, and widespread corruption, which render the accountability mechanism and policy performance of democratic governments flawed (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). As such, democratic institutions are increasingly becoming ritualised practices rather than instruments of transformational governance, which is why there is a paradoxical situation of democracy without development. This proceduralism is an indication of a critical disjunction between the formal form ordering of democratic rule and its ability to provide substantive socioeconomic results.

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

According to Seteolu (2004), six major leadership paradigms are identified in terms of trait, behavioural, attributional, charismatic, transformational, and visionary, which identify dimensions of effectiveness applicable in governance. Transformational and visionary leadership emphasise that ethical foresight, planning, and communication can be used to renew society and reform institutions. This type of leadership can manifest the idea of democracy in policies that can achieve social welfare, economic prosperity, and institutional sustainability (Bakare et al., 2019). A high degree of integrity, transparency, and emotional intelligence are features of effective democratic leadership that allow leaders to achieve trust, enhance institutional legitimacy, and increase citizen engagement. Trends of chronic leadership remain deficient in the Nigerian context, however, which is personalised rule, corruption, ethno-regional favouritism, and policy incoherence (Seteolu, 2004). Political power is usually used to consolidate elite interests against serving the greater good and to continue to create poverty, joblessness, infrastructural deficits, and sociopolitical alienation.

#### **Linking Democracy and Leadership: Toward an Analytical Model:-**

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

#### **Theoretical Framework:-**

##### **Elite Theory:-**

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

Mosca (1939) also conceptualises society as dichotomous, where a ruling minority controls and the majority is docile. In this argument, Michels (1911) goes further to add the so-called iron law of oligarchy, which states that even a democratic state puts power in the hands of a few or groups of a political party, a political organisation, or the allocation of resources, in general (Hamat et al., 2024). This kind of power concentration can lead to a loss of participatory governance, a compromised system of accountability, and the continuation of social and economic inequality. Elite Theory explains how, since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999, socio-political and economic power has been concentrated in the hands of a small group of actors in Nigeria. The members of this elite include politicians, military participants, industrialists, and religious leaders, whose interconnected networks are in charge of policymaking, institutions, and resource allocation (Sufyan & Dauda, 2025). The idea

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of the power elite concept by Mills (1956) can be used to describe this constellation, as it is an overlapping of political, economic, and military power that strengthens hegemony by the elite and supports systemic inequalities.

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

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

#### **Neo-patrimonialism, Prebendalism, and Public Choice Theory:-**

To enrich the theoretical underpinning of this study, three other supportive theories are introduced and integrated in this study, namely neo-patrimonialism, prebendalism, and public choice theory. The three lenses contribute to the analysis, making it a complex model of democratic failure in Nigeria that goes beyond mere description. Neo-patrimonialism refers to a mode of governance that combines formal rules of a modern bureaucratic state with informal, rule-of-persondom principles of public resources being considered private property of rulers and the loyalty networks replacing merit-based accountability (Bratton & van de Walle, 1994). In the Nigerian Fourth Republic, neopatrimonialism is noticeable in the regular allocation of the federal purse in favor of political patronage, the hiring of party loyalists to unqualified technical jobs, and the general disregard of institutional rules by personal executive will. In other words, Oyetunde (2022) says that neopatrimonialism has become such an established practice in Nigeria that it is a parallel informal constitution to the formal one and that it is so pervasive in its application that it works in tandem with or even trumps the formal constitution.

The concept of neo-patrimonialism is closely related to Richard Joseph's basic theory of prebendalism in Nigeria. It was coined by Joseph (1987) to refer to a situation where a state office is treated like a 'prebend,' and the officeholder is given the right to allocate the resources as they please in order to extract 'material benefits' for themselves and for the ethnic or factional group for which they hold office. Joseph wrote that the theory of 'prebendalism' views state offices as prebends that the officeholders can use to produce material gains both for themselves and their constituents and kin groups (1996). This system involves the use of public resources that are not used for the betterment of the nation but used for rewards for ethnic and/or regional clientelistic networks. The repercussions for development are disastrous: development budgets are used as tools for transferring wealth to the elites; meritocracy in the civil service breaks down; and the fiscal and institutional capacity of the state to provide public goods increasingly withers away (Joseph, 1987). The prebendal structure of Joseph has since been one of the most cited explanatory models in the field of African political economy. It is still very much applicable in modern-day Nigeria, where the appointments of ministers, allocation of funds for constituencies, and the federal character formula are still reflective of the prebendal idea rather than developmental logic (Sufyan & Dauda, 2025).

The third pillar, public choice theory (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962), explains the micro-level aspects of the sub-optimal behaviour exhibited by individual politicians as characterized by prebendalism at the macro-level and neopatrimonialism. Public choice theory assumes that political actors - both voters and bureaucrats as well as elected politicians - are rational, utility-maximizing actors in the political marketplace who act in their own best interests in the same way that they would act in an economic marketplace (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). In Nigeria, public choice theory shows that corruption and governance failure are not just a result of bad moral character or lack of moral values by itself, but a rational response to a political landscape where the benefits derived from rent-seeking are greater than those gained from public interest policies (Kasali, 2020; Mbaku & Paul, 1989). As long as the political system of a state offers many opportunities to extract rents (oil rent, federal transfer payments, contract revenues) and has no good accountability mechanisms, rational politicians with self-interest will choose rent-seeking over developmental governance. The net effect is a collective action failure, socially sub-optimal outcomes

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at the national level, such as decaying infrastructure, insufficiently funded education and healthcare, and chronic poverty. This study uses public choice theory and prebendalism to show that the paradox in democracy in Nigeria is structurally predictable and theoretically explicable.

### **Research Methods:-**

The study was based on a qualitative research design as secondary data were sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, archival records, newspapers, and authoritative online databases. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data, which allowed the identification of patterns, trends, and stories on political leadership, governance, and democratic development in Nigeria systematically. The three criteria for selecting sources were: relevance in terms of time (published between 1987 and 2025 for a longitudinal analysis), relevance in terms of method (peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science journals and reports from world-class organisations such as the World Bank, UNDP, Mo Ibrahim Foundation and Transparency International), and relevance in terms of theme (direct relevance to leadership quality, institutional performance, electoral governance, and developmental outcomes in Nigeria). Purposive selection of secondary sources was done because they are relevant, credible, and have an extensive analysis on the topic. After selecting the sources, collected information was systematically coded and compared against three analytical categories, which were based on the theoretical frameworks: (1) legislative oversight capacity - to what extent the National Assembly is able to scrutinize the expenditure and policy of the Executive branch independently; (2) bureaucratic autonomy - extent of merit based civil service appointments versus patronage driven appointments; (3) judicial independence - documented rulings of the electoral tribunals or anti-corruption courts, where the rulings upheld or weakened the democratic accountability. The thematic content helped analyse the democratic course of Nigeria in a systematic way and the connection between the quality of leadership, the performance of the institutions, and the results of the development processes. Historical and structural contextualisation were also made possible through this approach to describe patterns of governance amidst long-term failures in leadership and elite capture. To ensure validity and reliability, methodological triangulation was conducted by means of cross-reporting of sources so that the results would be internally coherent and reflective of larger socio-political realities.

### **Discussion:-**

#### **The Nexus Between Democracy, Leadership, and Development:-**

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

#### **Democracy as the Empowerment of Development:-**

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

#### **Leadership as the Functional Core of Democracy:-**

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

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

#### **Democracy, Leadership and Development Interdependence:-**

Democracy and development cannot happen without leadership. Democracy has a structure that ensures accountability, transparency, and involvement, and leadership is the determining factor in whether these mechanisms benefit the populace or continue to uphold elite domination. Since leadership must be visionary, accountable, and inclusive, democracy has the ability to initiate policy changes, economic growth, and promote equal social results. On the other hand, predatory leadership compromises institutional integrity, spreads corruption, and interferes with development. Empirical experience from Nigeria shows that the quality of leadership moderates the association between procedural democracy and developmental paths. The poor, lack of employment, insecurity, and lack of infrastructure are all signs of missed opportunities by political elites over the years to use democratic institutions to serve the country. Lack of leadership intensifies social imbalance and breeds conflict, thus placing further restrictions on development. Nigeria is a case in point of how poor leadership undermines both security and human development in the northern parts of the country that have been plagued by a long-standing insurgency, lack of governance, and disregard for social amenities. At the same time, the agglomeration of wealth and infrastructure in the south and cities shows the spatial consequences of an elite-dominated form of governance (Pinto, 2020). These trends highlight the fact that the democratic potential of democracy cannot be actualised in the context where leadership does not operationalise participatory mechanisms towards the benefit of a large number of people.

#### **Poor Leadership and Democratic Governance Crisis in Nigeria:-**

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

#### **Poor Leadership in Nigeria:-**

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

These structural failures are clearly reflected in major governance indicators. In 2023, Nigeria was 140th on Transparency International's (2024; WAMAC, 2025) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), with a score of 25/100 on the index, before making only a slight improvement in 2024 to 26/100. Nigeria's performance on the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) score is consistently weak on all relevant indicators, having averaged about -1.1 on the WGI's standard normal scale between 1999 and 2023, and that of Government Effectiveness and Rule of Law are also lower than the global median (World Bank, 2025). These figures are not statistics but the summed-up cost of prebendal governance by institutions on the reality of Nigerian citizens' lives.

#### **Disaggregating the Nigerian State: Sub-National Institutional Variance:-**

The Nigerian state is a monolithic entity, which is a methodological shortcoming that has plagued studies on Nigeria's democratic failure as a country and has been a feature of this study. This analytical joining together hides the intricate institutional relations within the federation's 36 states and 774 local government areas (LGAs). A sub-national disaggregated analysis shows that leadership failures and institutional breakdowns are not even distributed throughout the country; they occur to different degrees across the country, and this is related to the quality of the political economy, leadership capability, and governance innovations.

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This variation is shown with comparative sub-national evidence. Governor Nasir Ahmad el-Rufai (2015-2023) of Kaduna State was a pioneer in the provision of IT institutions to provide solutions to corruption in the civil service through decentralisation, the restructuring of the school curriculum, and the creation of a digital anti-corruption platform, which garnered the state recognition in governance transparency assessments (Eleyi& Ogidi, 2025). Also, at the state level, Ekiti State was able to achieve an increment of 3.3 points on the Governance Accountability and Transparency Index (GATI) in 2025 to its 2024 score of 86.3 (Oladosu, 2026), indicating some measurable improvement in governance at the state level. In contrast, regions in the North-East and North-West of Nigeria that the Boko Haram insurgency and banditry have ravaged have witnessed administrative collapse, with public schools left abandoned, LGA councils unable to function, and expenditure on security spending replacing social spending (Ezenwa et al., 2025).

This sub-national disaggregation has implications in terms of analysis. It questions the deterministic narratives that diagnose the democratic failure in Nigeria at the national level. It illustrates that leadership improvement, even incremental and in the same broad framework of federalism, can lead to developmental improvement. The continuation of elite capture and institutional dysfunction at the federal level should be viewed as a governance preference, rather than an institutional fact, as this is important for policy change.

#### **Weak Institutions and Democratic Fragility:-**

Democratic consolidation cannot be achieved without strong institutional support. They maintain checks and balances, the rule of law, and mechanisms of accountability and trust of the people. The politics of patronisation and elite capture continue to compromise institutional independence in Nigeria. Other critical democratic institutions, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the judiciary, and anti-corruption agencies, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), often work under political influence, which undermines their functional performance as well as their legitimacy among the population (Mgbeahurike, 2025). Democratic legitimacy rests on the centrality of electoral institutions, which have been accused on numerous occasions of bias and manipulation. Several gubernatorial and presidential elections were contested between 2003 and 2019 as a result of ballot rigging, vote buying, and disenfranchisement of opposition voters (Akinyetun, 2021). Reports reveal that the INEC was at various times prone to political influence, which weakened the image of the elections and supported a spiral of elite domination. Equally, the judiciary, which is supposed to apply electoral and anti-corruption laws, has been accused of biased adjudication, which is not only a systemic weakness but also an impact of influential forces (Akinyetun et al., 2025). Thus, democratic frailty results from poor institutions. When the oversight bodies cannot fulfil their mandate without being biased, the leaders will operate with impunity, and the rule of law will be nothing but a theoretical provision. This leads to a hollow democracy, in which there are procedural institutions that lack the conversion into substantive governance or empowerment of citizens (Akinyetun, 2022).

#### **Electoral Technology, Judicial Integrity, and the Shifting Terrain of Elite Capture:-**

The analysis above calls for the intensive discussion of the various efforts towards electoral reform, especially the use of digital technology, and of the position of the judiciary as the last referee in the dispute over elections. The deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Election Result Viewing Portal (IREV) before the 2023 general elections was one of the most ambitious and daring moves made in Nigeria's electoral history. As intended, the BVAS would provide voter authentication through fingerprint and facial recognition and would prevent multiple voting and impersonation. At the same time, IREV would allow public access to the results of polling units during the collation, which would make large-scale falsification during collation much more difficult (Ifeanyi-Ajufo & Hoffmann, 2023; Itodo, 2022).

However, when put into practice, it revealed the technological constraints when institutional integrity is lacking. On election day, it was reported that BVASs went wrong in several states, including Borno, Lagos and Rivers; INEC officials reportedly forgot portal passwords which were critical for uploading results; and the European Union Election Observation Mission observed a high number of failures in the electronic transmission of presidential results (Acheampong, 2023; Sibe &Kaunert, 2023). The Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy also reported that the electoral infrastructure of Nigeria was attacked by more than 12 million cyberattacks during the presidential election in 2023 (Sibe &Kaunert, 2023). Overall, although there had been a significant technological investment, credibility in the electoral process remained questionable.

What more can be said than that, though, is what transpired post-poll? The case of Peter Obi v INEC & Ors, which went down to the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal and Supreme Court, was partly on the integrity of the BVAS and IREV transmissions. The courts, however, held that the electoral technology was not applied correctly, including the real-time transmission consistency, and found the elections to be annulled (Nmor& Onochie, 2024). This situation highlights a pivotal point: the digitisation of elections did not end elite manipulation of elections, but rather the arena in which they contest has increasingly moved from the polling place to the courtroom. In independent judiciaries, the judicial turnaround can help bolster democratic accountability. If judicial institutions are vulnerable to elite pressure, as has been reported in Nigeria (Hoffman,

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2024), electoral technology is a sham; it gives the impression of a façade of democratic processes and outcomes but does not actually provide any protection.

### **Destruction of Civic Confidence and Political Apathy:-**

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

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

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

### **Development Outcomes: A Broader Assessment:-**

The foregoing analysis has been largely centred on the political and institutional aspects of failed democracy. Still, a more in-depth consideration of the democratic paradox in Nigeria demands a much wider consideration of the developmental aspects of the country in various sectors. The information shows a systemic failure to deliver on democratic governance, since this underperformance is happening across administrations and is a sign of a structural problem of delivering human welfare. Data from UNESCO (2022) shows that Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, with an estimated 20 million primary and secondary school-age children out of school. Public primary and secondary schools continue to be underfunded, even if the conditions in some parts of the country, especially the North-East and North-West zones, are dire, with low facilities, low teacher-to-student ratios, and very few teachers. In the health sector, Nigeria's under-5 mortality rate is 111.4 per 1,000 live births in 2022, which is high compared to the African Union's Abuja Declaration goal of 25, along with health expenditure consistently being lower than 15% of GDP (WHO, 2023; World Bank, 2024). These sectoral challenges are further exacerbated by infrastructure deficits, such as the \$3 trillion cost of funding Nigeria's infrastructure over the next 30 years, and the lack of adequate power generation capacity, with only 5,000 megawatts supplied to a population of over 220 million people (World Bank, 2023). The developmental aspect of Nigeria's democratic paradox can be broadly seen in these indicators as a failure of the state as a whole to fulfil its most basic responsibilities to citizens in the state.

### **Alternative Structural Explanations for Nigeria's Developmental Stagnation:-**

For Nigeria to develop, the blame for leadership failure should not be the only or main reason for its development stagnation if it is to be used as a pretext for the failure. The democratic paradox of the country needs to be explained and understood, and that means accepting and considering alternative structural explanations, even if it is clear from the bulk of the evidence that leadership quality is still the dominant mediating variable.

Structural factors are carried over from the colonial period and include the colonial legacy. The British colonial administration intentionally designed the pre-independence political economy to cater for the export of raw materials instead of development: the pre independence political economy was designed by the British colonial administration to cater for the export of raw materials, railway network was oriented towards export of raw materials, administrative units were drawn along ethnic lines to facilitate divide and rule governance, independence was never effectuated with meaningful transfer of institutional capacity

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(Abdullahi & Chembayi, 2025). This sort of extractive colonial architecture remains in the background of the institutional legacy in which the leaders of the post-colonial era are still working.

Structural constraints comprise a second, the resource curse, or the ‘paradox of plenty’ as it is put in the analytical jargon. The excessive dependence on oil (which is responsible for Nigeria’s export earnings of over 90%) has produced the classic resource curse dynamics: oil-induced Dutch disease effect which de-industrialised the non-oil economy, oil rent windfalls which reduced the need for domestic tax collection thus weakening the accountability nexus between government and citizens, and oil price shocks of 2014 and 2020 which caused the Nigerian economy to enter recession and exposed the structural vulnerability of single-commodity dependence (Ake, 1996; Gros, 2025). An estimated \$15 billion was lost due to fraudulent oil subsidy schemes alone, between 2010 and 2020 (Gros, 2025). In the absence of adequate accountability, as public choice theory foresees, the large oil rents provide strong incentives to extract them rather than invest in them.

The third structural dimension is demographic pressures. Nigeria’s population stands at more than 220,000,000 and is increasing at the rate of 2.4% per annum and will become the third largest in the world by 2050. The demographic trend puts a tremendous strain on health services, job markets, and the environment, a strain that even the best and most resourced governments would have trouble coping with. Even with good governance, the current flow of around 1.8 million new young job-seekers per year and the inadequate supply of formal job opportunities in the economy are structurally ensuring high youth unemployment levels every year (Gros, 2025).

It doesn’t stop one from considering the role of leadership failure as an explanatory factor, though. Instead, it puts it into perspective in a broader framework of analysis. The influence of colonial legacy, resource dependency, and demographic pressures is not a foregone conclusion in development - instead, it is a governance challenge which leaders must manage. The evidence on how well or poorly some states in Nigeria get governance relative to others - and this despite the many structural constraints they face - shows that leadership choices make a difference even with structural constraints. The thrust of this paper is not to suggest that the quality of leadership is the only factor that accounts for the difficulty of governance; it is the most important intervening factor; however, the difficulty of governance is determined by the structural constraints, and the quality of leadership determines the quality of governance.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations:-**

An overview of Nigerian democracy since 1999 shows that there has been a multifaceted interaction of political leadership and democratic institutions and development. Although democracy is theoretically empowered with accountability, participation, and equitable governance mechanisms, as the case of Nigerians shows, institutional strength is not sufficient in promoting development. The problem here is a failure of leadership, as this always undermines democratic possibilities and stalls development. Nigeria has suffered under leadership that is characterized by corruption, impunity, and patrimonialism, whereby the interest of the people is ignored. Political elites have increasingly undermined democratic processes and state machineries to attain individual power, drain resources, and institutionalise patronage. These malpractices simply erode institutional capacity, undermine people’s trust, and result in citizens’ disengagement. Therefore, Nigeria’s democracy is usually procedural but not substantive, which generates electoral rituals without transformative governance or sustainable socioeconomic gains.

These dynamics were analysed using Elite Theory, supplemented by neo-patrimonialism, prebendalism, and public choice theory. Nigeria’s sociopolitical and economic influence is still held by a small number of players who distort democratic values to maintain their control. Elite capture is a theory that clarifies how weak institutions, inefficiencies in governance, and stagnated development continue to persist because democratic failure in Nigeria is more of a leadership issue than an institutional one. The combination of this prebendal theory with the state office theory of public choice illuminates how state offices have been reduced to means of private accumulation and ethnic patronage and how rational individual motives make it collectively irrational yet stable without credible constraints on the rulers. These all offer a merged theoretical structure for grasping the phenomenon of democratic failure across different administrations and under a democratic form of government. However, there is still much potential in the Nigerian democratic system, with proper, accountable, and visionary institutions of democracy, transparency, civility, and development that are policy-oriented. The analysis highlights that efficient leadership that can be characterized by integrity, futuristic vision, policy focus, and citizen-oriented decision-making is key to the conversion of the idea of democracy into real developmental results. Thus, the democratic deficit is not a systemic issue but a result of the mismanagement of leadership and the domination of the elites.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were proffered. First, the judiciary, legislature, electoral institutions, and anti-corruption institutions should be shielded against politics. Institutional independence, transparency, and capacity building are essential to the improvement of accountability and the rebuilding of public trust in democratic processes. Second, political parties and civil society organizations must prioritise competence, integrity, and visionary capacity in leadership choices. Candidate vetting, leadership training mechanisms, and performance accountability can be used to ensure leaders who are dedicated to the development of the nation. Third, well-structured civic education programs may enable citizens to discuss

informed voting, participate in the development of policies, and demand accountability from the leaders. Voter apathy should be minimised to develop a political culture that embraces ethical and competent leadership. Furthermore, effective anti-corruption systems, combined with high compliance with financial and ethical regulations, are necessary to avoid elite capture and promote fair distribution of resources. Finally, the government should aim to eradicate poverty, create jobs, build infrastructure, and distribute wealth evenly. Reducing socioeconomic inequalities increases citizens' trust in democratic institutions and leads to national cohesion. The concentration of power, lack of accountability in federal power, and institutionalised transparency, checks, and balances should be curtailed through constitutional and policy changes to ensure that the interests of the people are safeguarded. A system of structural oversight is required to limit elite domination and foster elite leadership reflexivity that corresponds to the overall common good.

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