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Democratic Backsliding in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Trends in Civilian Governance and Emerging Authoritarian Drift

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Abstract

Since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999, there was widespread optimism that the Fourth Republic would signal a clear break from authoritarianism and firmly establish democratic governance, the rule of law, and active citizen participation. However, over two decades later, Nigeria's democracy appears to be deteriorating rather than progressing. This study investigates the rising trend of democratic decline under civilian administrations, focusing especially on President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's tenure, during which subtle authoritarianism, weakening institutions, and the suppression of opposition have become more evident. Using Democratic Consolidation Theory as a framework, the paper analyzes how diminishing judicial independence, legislative compliance, the securitization of governance, and shrinking spaces for civic engagement reflect an authoritarian shift within a formal democratic system. Based on interviews with lawmakers, civil society representatives, political figures, and scholars, the paper argues that Nigeria exhibits key traits of a hybrid regime-where elections take place but fundamental democratic norms are hollowed out. The findings suggest that without comprehensive reforms aimed at restoring civil rights, strengthening democratic institutions, and ensuring accountability, Nigeria risks entrenching a pseudo-democratic system with significant repercussions for democracy in Africa.

Keywords: Authoritarian Drift, Civic Space, Democratic Backsliding, Electoral Authoritarianism, Institutional Decay

Introduction

Nigeria's shift to civilian rule in 1999, after years of military dictatorship, was widely celebrated as a pivotal moment, heralding a fresh democratic era (Oni, 2014). Both within Nigeria and globally, there were significant expectations that this new phase, inaugurating the Fourth Republic, would firmly establish core democratic tenets. These included unwavering adherence to the rule of law, profound respect for civil liberties, transparent and accountable governance, and a commitment to inclusive socio-economic advancement (Yusufu, Idrees & Ogaji, 2022). It was broadly anticipated that Nigeria would systematically dismantle the vestiges of authoritarianism and cultivate robust, resilient democratic institutions capable of withstanding elite influence and political instability.

Yet, over two decades into this democratic journey, the initial optimism has largely dissipated, replaced by growing public disenchantment (Vande & Yusufu, 2024). Nigeria's democratic evolution has exposed enduring structural and institutional weaknesses that obstruct genuine consolidation. Rather than a deepening of democratic norms, what has materialized is a pattern of backsliding-where authoritarian inclinations are masked by the trappings of democratic formalities (Manuwa, 2023). Key democratic institutions, including the judiciary, legislature, and electoral bodies, have been compromised, while civic freedoms continue to deteriorate. Instead of institutional consolidation, the polity increasingly resembles a hybrid regime marked by executive overreach, elite impunity, and declining civic participation. The net effect is that the ordinary citizens seem to have gradually lost hope in the system that replaced the military regime, while the rulers and supposed representatives of the people-who live in opulence that does not conform to the current economic realities in the country-seem less bothered. (yagboyaju, 2011, p.93)

Democratic backsliding in Nigeria is a long-standing issue that predates President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration; previous leaders have also contributed to the country's democratic decline. For instance, Manuwa (2023) notes an increase in violations of human rights, media freedom, judicial independence, and civil society space under the administrations of Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo, Umaru Yar'Adua, Goodluck Jonathan, and Muhammadu Buhari. However, this trend of democratic erosion seems to have intensified under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who took office in May 2023 after a highly disputed election. Despite promises of reform, his initial policy decisions-especially the abrupt removal of the fuel subsidy without sufficient social and economic safeguards-have worsened public hardship and increased the divide between the government and the populace (Yusufu, Audu & Audu, 2024). The lack of adequate relief measures has further eroded public trust and reinforced the perception that the government is indifferent to the struggles of ordinary Nigerians (Yusufu, Audu & Audu, 2025).

Beyond economic distress, Nigeria is beset by escalating insecurity. The prevalence of violent crimes, including banditry, terrorism, communal violence, and abductions for ransom, has revealed the state's diminished capacity to guarantee safety and order (Yusufu, 2022; Adamu & Yusufu, 2024). This pervasive insecurity has not only devastated livelihoods but has also undermined the legitimacy and credibility of democratic governance. Compounding these issues is the increasing restriction of civic space. There is a growing tendency to suppress dissent, as evidenced by state-sanctioned intimidation of critical voices including artists, journalists, youth corps members, and activists. The recent cases involving musician Eedris Abdulkareem who criticized President Tinubu administration via a song titled "Seyi tell your papa", and National Youth Service Corps member Ushie Uguamaye who described Tinubu as a "terrible leader" because of the deteriorating living conditions of the people, illustrate an intensifying trend of using state apparatus to stifle opposition and dissent. Such developments indicate a shift from liberal

democratic norms toward a securitized and authoritarian mode of governance (Manuwa, 2023).

Nigeria's experience of democratic decline mirrors a broader pattern unfolding across several African countries. While many of these states maintain the formal elements of democracy-such as periodic elections and institutional structures-the essential qualities that sustain democratic governance are progressively being undermined. The early 1990s heralded a wave of democratic transitions across Africa, but in recent years, especially within West Africa, a noticeable reversal has occurred, often referred to as democratic backsliding (Arthur, 2025). Although elections are still conducted, they frequently lack meaningful competition and transparency, while key institutions, though present, often operate under the shadow of dominant executive control. This evolving dynamic-commonly labelled as democratic erosion or authoritarian resurgence-has sparked serious debate over the viability of democracy on the continent (Oke, 2010; Foa, Mounk & Inglehart, 2016). Nonetheless, this interpretation is not universally accepted. Some analysts argue that the notion of widespread democratic deterioration in sub-Saharan Africa may be overstated. For example, Leonardo, Lise, and Nicolas (2022) maintain that the region's democratic evolution over the past twenty years has largely remained stable. Rather than showing clear advancement or decline, several countries appear locked in a state of democratic inertia, where civil and political liberties have seen little substantive change since the democratic breakthroughs of the early 1990s.

In response to these concerns, the present study employs Democratic Consolidation Theory to analyze the evolving dynamics of democratic decline in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. This theoretical approach posits that democracy cannot be sustained by electoral processes alone; it demands the institutionalization of democratic norms, independence of governance institutions, protection of individual freedoms, and widespread societal acceptance of democratic rules. This framework is instrumental in interrogating the extent to which Nigeria's governance practices increasingly blur the boundaries between civilian democracy and authoritarianism-an issue with profound implications for transitional democracies across the Global South.

Statement of the Problem

The democratic experiment initiated in Nigeria in 1999, marking the beginning of the Fourth Republic, was widely perceived as a pivotal shift away from military despotism toward a system grounded in inclusive governance, institutional integrity, and civic liberties. Yet, over two decades later, the country stands at a precarious juncture. The initial promise of democratic transformation appears to have devolved into a hybridized form of governance-where civilian leadership persists, but foundational democratic principles are steadily undermined.

This process of democratic attrition has given rise to a regime that outwardly preserves the formal architecture of democracy-regular elections, constitutional rule, and multi-party politics-while simultaneously diluting its core substance. A concentration of power in the executive, the increasing ineffectiveness of the legislature, and growing concerns over judicial independence have collectively contributed to an environment marked by the suppression of dissent, the shrinking of civic space, and routine violations of the doctrine of separation of powers (Oke, 2010). These regressive tendencies have become more pronounced under the leadership of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, with heightened efforts to silence opposition and repress peaceful protest.

Illustrative of this trend are the censorship of politically sensitive artistic productions and the harassment of citizens for voicing discontent, which reflect a broader pattern of authoritarian intolerance toward opposing viewpoints. The judiciary, once envisioned as a safeguard against executive excess, is now widely viewed as compromised, while the legislature-especially under the stewardship of Senate President Godswill Akpabio-has been increasingly reduced to an appendage of the presidency. These institutional shortcomings are unfolding in the context of intensifying economic distress, pervasive insecurity, and a deteriorating social pact between the state and its citizens.

Against this backdrop of democratic erosion, this study critically scrutinizes the evolution of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, exposing the subtle yet potent authoritarian tendencies embedded within its formal democratic structures. Beyond Nigeria's borders, this analysis extends to explore the profound consequences of its democratic backsliding for other African countries facing similar challenges, where the façade of electoral competition often conceals deeper authoritarian consolidation.

Research Questions

1. How have civil liberties and the civic space evolved under the administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu?
2. In what ways has institutional decay facilitated the erosion of democratic checks and balances in Nigeria's Fourth Republic?
3. How does the securitization of governance and suppression of dissent reveal authoritarian tendencies under a nominally civilian regime?
4. What lessons can Nigeria's experience offer for understanding broader patterns of democratic backsliding across Africa?

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the trajectory of civil liberties and the status of civic space under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration.
2. To analyze the role of institutional decay in weakening democratic checks and balances within Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

3. To investigate how the securitization of governance and the repression of dissent reflect an authoritarian drift under civilian rule.
4. To assess the broader implications of Nigeria's democratic backsliding for democratic consolidation across the African continent.

Literature Review

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Democracy is commonly conceptualized as a governance system underpinned by competitive elections, adherence to the rule of law, respect for fundamental rights, and a framework of institutional accountability (Dahl, 1971; Diamond, 1999). A central tenet of democratic theory is the idea of democratic consolidation, which refers to the process through which democratic practices and institutions become deeply embedded and widely accepted as the standard mode of governance-what Linz and Stepan (1996) famously described as democracy becoming “the only game in town.” This notion emphasizes more than the mere conduct of elections; it involves cultivating democratic values within the broader political culture and strengthening the independence and functionality of institutions (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). In contrast, democratic backsliding or deconsolidation occurs when these democratic characteristics deteriorate-where procedural formalities may persist but substantive liberties and institutional autonomy are eroded (Foa, Mounk, & Inglehart, 2016). The emergence of hybrid regimes captures this reality, where the facade of democracy coexists with autocratic behaviors such as executive overreach, suppression of opposition, and manipulation of the electoral process (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

This study is grounded in Democratic Consolidation Theory (DCT), which gained prominence during the so-called “third wave” of democratization in the late 20th century, as articulated by Huntington (1991) and further developed by Linz and Stepan (1996). The theory focuses not only on how democracies emerge but critically on how they become stable and self-reinforcing. It rests on several foundational conditions: democracy must be recognized as the sole legitimate framework by all key actors; institutional norms must be solidified through robust, autonomous bodies; civilian supremacy over the military must be preserved to avoid democratic reversals; civil society should be vibrant and engaged; credible political competition must be supported by functional parties and legitimate elections; the rule of law must be upheld through an impartial judiciary; and an efficient state apparatus should support democratic legitimacy. Applying this theoretical lens to Nigeria's democratic journey since 1999 highlights a complex interplay of achievements and setbacks. While the country has sustained an electoral democracy for over two decades, many core democratic norms remain underdeveloped (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). Politicians often engage in undemocratic practices-such as electoral fraud, vote buying, and political intimidation-suggesting that democratic procedures are still not universally embraced as the only acceptable mode of governance. Institutional checks and balances are

increasingly undermined as both the legislature and judiciary are frequently subordinated to executive interests.

Legislative branch often acts in alignment with executive directives, while judicial independence is undermined by political interference and systemic corruption. Meanwhile, civil liberties are under strain; dissent is frequently met with coercion, curbing freedom of expression and meaningful civic participation-key components of democratic consolidation. The state's security apparatus is regularly deployed to enforce political loyalty rather than ensure public safety, signaling a turn toward militarized governance. Additionally, unpopular economic measures-such as the hasty removal of the fuel subsidy-have exacerbated economic distress and eroded public confidence in state institutions, fostering disaffection and weakening the social contract.

In this context, Democratic Consolidation Theory offers a critical analytical framework for understanding Nigeria's current democratic decline. It reveals how fragile institutions, reduced civic freedoms, authoritarian governance patterns, and diminishing public legitimacy collectively drive the ongoing erosion of democratic norms in the country's Fourth Republic.

Empirical Insights on Nigeria's Democratic Trajectory

Empirical research increasingly points to a troubling trend of democratic decline in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. According to Suberu (2011), institutional weakening has eroded the principle of separation of powers, with the executive arm gradually asserting dominance over both the legislature and judiciary. This centralization of authority has been further intensified by the adoption of securitization measures that prioritize regime stability and frequently serve as a pretext for suppressing political opposition and civil society engagement (Jinadu, 2018). The freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly have come under sustained assault through the application of draconian laws; while dissenting voices are often subjected to intimidation and censorship (Ojo & Adeniran, 2021).

The onset of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration in 2023 has amplified existing anxieties over democratic backsliding. For instance, the sudden withdrawal of the fuel subsidy, implemented without adequate social safety nets, has exacerbated public discontent and further diminished citizens' confidence in state institutions (Afolayan, 2024). Concurrently, the government's inability to effectively address worsening insecurity-including terrorism, banditry, and communal clashes-has cast doubt on its capacity to fulfill its fundamental responsibility of protecting lives and property, thereby weakening democratic legitimacy (Ikelegbe, 2023). Civil society actors and watchdog organizations continue to report growing constraints on civic freedoms, with journalists, artists, and human rights defenders increasingly targeted through harassment, intimidation, and legal persecution (Amnesty International, 2023).

The subservience of the legislative arm to executive will, coupled with the judiciary's perceived lack of independence, further underscores the breakdown of institutional checks and balances (Akinola, 2022). These observable dynamics suggest that Nigeria is veering toward a hybrid political system-where formal democratic processes persist but are undermined by authoritarian tendencies that restrict authentic political competition (Suberu & Diamond, 2020).

Regional Context and Comparative Analysis

Nigeria's democratic difficulties reflect a wider phenomenon seen across the African continent, where numerous nations show signs of democratic weakening despite maintaining formal electoral processes (Gyimah-Boadi, 2019). Research reveals that executive dominance, manipulation of elections, and the constriction of civic freedoms are prevalent characteristics within this regional trend (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Lindberg, 2006). While regional organizations such as the African Union and ECOWAS have called for the reinforcement of democratic governance, their enforcement efforts often lack consistency (Fombad, 2014).

Comparative studies indicate that Nigeria's situation is emblematic of a broader continental challenge to advance beyond mere procedural democracy and achieve substantive democratic consolidation (Schmitter, 2016). These developments underscore the critical need for Nigeria and other similarly positioned countries to pursue deep institutional reforms and renew democratic principles to forestall further democratic decline.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative and exploratory research design. A purposive sampling method was used to select five key informants, including legislators, political party officials, civil society leaders, human rights activists, and governance scholars. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and supplemented with secondary sources such as books, journals and web-based materials. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.

Results and Discussion

This section outlines and analyzes the empirical results obtained from comprehensive interviews with five key informants. The thematic analysis uncovered five interconnected patterns that shed light on the dynamics of democratic backsliding in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, especially under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration.

(a) *Executive Control and Decline of Legislative Independence:* Legislators consistently described ongoing executive encroachment that has significantly weakened the separation of powers. Instead of functioning as an independent branch, the legislature

often acts as a submissive extension of the executive, particularly under dominant single-party rule. Legislative duties such as budgeting, oversight, and policy discussions are frequently limited by informal pressures, party loyalty, and patronage politics. As one legislator noted, “The executive no longer seeks cooperation; it demands obedience.” This has resulted in superficial budget approvals, weak scrutiny of loans and appointments, and diminished democratic oversight. Such trends critically undermine democratic consolidation because when legislatures fail to check executive power, decision-making becomes overly centralized.

- (b) ***Political Parties as Tools for Elite Domination***: Insights from party officials and governance experts indicate that political parties in Nigeria have largely forsaken their role as democratic gatekeepers. Candidate selection processes are often dominated by elite interference, vote buying, and legal manipulation. Party primaries have become transactional arenas where financial influence and political loyalty outweigh ideological commitments or popular backing. The lack of strong opposition has fostered democratic stagnation, with ruling parties using state resources to intimidate, co-opt, or marginalize opponents. This has entrenched a political cartel insulated from accountability and indifferent to democratic reform.
- (c) ***Governance Securitization and Shrinking Civic Space***: Civil society leaders and human rights activists expressed significant concerns about the narrowing space for civic engagement. Since the 2020 #EndSARS protests, there has been an escalation in criminalizing dissent, surveillance of activists, and the use of force against peaceful protesters. Respondents described security agencies operating with impunity, targeting artists, online commentators, and Non-Governmental Organizations under broad charges such as “threats to national security.” Under President Tinubu’s government, this securitization trend has intensified, conflating dissent with threats to stability. The use of cybercrime laws and security forces to suppress expression, especially online, has created a chilling effect. Without vibrant civic spaces, democratic debate and contestation cannot flourish.
- (d) ***Institutional Fragility and Democratic Undermining***: Academics emphasized the harmful impact of institutional decay on democratic governance. Oversight bodies, regulatory agencies, and judicial institutions—including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the judiciary, and anti-corruption bodies—are widely viewed as politically compromised. Respondents pointed to frequent executive interference in judicial appointments and rulings, particularly in politically sensitive cases. The 2023 elections highlighted these institutional vulnerabilities, with low voter turnout, electoral violence, and allegations of manipulation undermining public confidence. Increasingly, electoral disputes are settled in courts rather than through transparent election processes, weakening democratic legitimacy. One scholar remarked, “We now vote in courts, not at polling stations.”
- (e) ***Nigeria as an Example of Hybrid Regimes in the Global South***: Drawing from governance scholars and civil society perspectives, the findings indicate that Nigeria

increasingly exemplifies a “hybrid regime,” where democratic institutions exist in appearance but are functionally compromised. This regime type, discussed in literature on democratic erosion and competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010), is characterized by elections without accountability, parliaments lacking oversight, and curtailed freedoms justified by legal or security claims. This trend is not unique to Nigeria; respondents linked the country’s democratic backsliding to broader African patterns where regimes maintain the facade of democracy-regular elections, courts, formal opposition-while governing through repression, co-optation, and manipulation. Nigeria’s experience reflects this concerning continental trajectory.

- (f) ***Theoretical Implications: Insights for Democratic Consolidation Theory***: The results support key arguments of Democratic Consolidation Theory, which stresses that democracy’s endurance depends not only on formal institutions but also on elites’ commitment to democratic norms and active citizen participation. In Nigeria, although the democratic framework remains formally intact, its substantive and normative essence is steadily eroding. The normalization of illiberal behaviors-executive overreach, suppression of dissent, and institutional capture-indicates a shift from transitional democracy toward an illiberal, semi-authoritarian system. Given Nigeria’s status as Africa’s largest democracy, its political trajectory has significant implications for democratic resilience across the continent.

Conclusion

Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, once hailed as a pivotal moment for democratic progress, is now caught in a concerning pattern of decline. The country’s slide toward authoritarianism-marked by shrinking civic freedoms, weakening institutions, unchecked executive power, and the securitization of dissent-casts serious doubt on the legitimacy and resilience of its democratic project. Although civilian governance persists, essential democratic principles such as accountability, transparency, rule of law, and protection of civil rights have been severely compromised.

Under the current government, increased use of repressive measures, legislative passivity, and compromised judiciary have deepened Nigeria’s shift toward a hybrid regime, where authoritarian practices are disguised by democratic appearances. This backsliding undermines the goals of democratic consolidation and risks fostering a culture of fear, silence, and institutional dysfunction.

Nigeria’s experience is part of a wider trend across Africa, where many democracies are devolving into electoral authoritarianism-maintaining democratic processes superficially while eroding their core values.

Policy Recommendations

- a. Guarantee financial and administrative independence for both national and state legislatures. Strengthen legislative committees to carry out autonomous oversight without executive interference, thereby reinforcing the checks and balances vital for democratic strengthening.
- b. Secure tenure for judicial officers and protect them from political influence. Reform the National Judicial Council (NJC) to ensure appointments are based on merit and that disciplinary procedures remain impartial, helping to rebuild public confidence in the judiciary and the rule of law.
- c. Implement comprehensive structural and technological reforms within the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to enhance transparency, credibility, and public trust. This should include real-time electronic result transmission and strict enforcement of electoral laws.
- d. Modify or repeal harsh laws, such as provisions in the Cybercrime Act and anti-terrorism legislation, which are frequently misused to suppress dissent. These changes are essential to expanding civic freedoms and protecting constitutional rights.
- e. Launch a wide-reaching civic education initiative focused on youth and marginalized populations. The programme should raise awareness about democratic rights, duties, and mechanisms for accountability, thereby fostering more active and informed citizen participation.
- f. Create and operationalize independent electoral offenses tribunals at both the federal and state levels, designed to function swiftly in order to discourage electoral fraud and hold offenders accountable.

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