

BEYOND THE BLUEPRINT: DIAGNOSING CONSTITUTIONAL DISSONANCE IN NIGERIA'S NATION-BUILDING PROJECT

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Abstract

Nigeria's nation-building project remains perpetually incomplete, not from a lack of constitutional or developmental blueprints, but due to a profound constitutional-operational dissonance. This paper argues that the informal, patrimonial logic of civilian governance systematically subverts formal state designs, prioritizing nepotistic politics and ethnic patronage over national integration. Employing a critical qualitative analysis, this study diagnoses this core pathology. The findings reveal that the political class, adept at drafting plans, is invested in a system that renders them implementable, thereby maintaining a state of perpetual political incubation. To break this cycle, this paper proposes a fundamental shift from blueprint creation to institutional integrity. It recommends, first, the establishment of powerful, independent oversight bodies with prosecutorial authority to enforce constitutional principles and combat financial impunity. Second, it advocates for cultivating performance legitimacy, where governance is measured by tangible outcomes in security and service delivery, thereby incrementally rebuilding civic trust. The efficacy of Nigerian nation-building, therefore, hinges not on another plan, but on forging a governance structure accountable for its execution.

Keywords: *Constitutional Dissonance, Nepotistic Politics, Nation-Building, Performance Legitimacy, Institutional Integrity.*

Introduction

Nigeria's struggle with nation-building remains one of the most persistent challenges of its post-independence history. Since the colonial amalgamation of 1914, successive governments have attempted to construct a unified national identity through constitutions, development plans, and political reforms. Civilian administrations in particular have emphasized constitutional engineering and policy design as solutions to Nigeria's problems of integration, development, and stability. Despite these efforts, the Nigerian state continues to experience deep ethnic divisions, weak institutional trust, electoral crises, and rising insecurity. This persistent gap between planning and outcomes suggests that Nigeria's nation-building challenge is not primarily a problem of inadequate policy ideas or constitutional frameworks. Rather, it reflects a deeper structural issue in the way governance operates in practice. Although formal institutions promote democratic participation, accountability, and national unity, political behaviour often follows informal rules shaped by patronage, ethnic loyalty, and personal networks. Recent

studies on Nigerian governance show that informal political practices frequently override formal constitutional provisions, leading to weak implementation and selective enforcement of laws (Suberu, 2015; Lewis, 2018; Mustapha, 2021).

This paper describes this condition as constitutional-operational dissonance. The concept refers to the persistent mismatch between the formal constitutional order and the everyday realities of governance. While the constitution outlines an inclusive, rule-based state, actual political practice is often driven by what scholars describe as patrimonial or clientelist governance. In this system, political authority is personalized, public resources are distributed through loyalty networks, and access to state power becomes the main route to economic and political security (North, Wallis, and Weingast, 2013; Khan, 2018). In Nigeria's rent-dependent political economy, this form of governance is particularly entrenched. The state relies heavily on oil revenues rather than taxation, reducing accountability to citizens and intensifying competition for control of public office. As a result, elections are frequently framed along ethnic and religious lines, institutions are weakened to protect elite interests, and public offices are treated as instruments for patronage distribution rather than service delivery (Lewis & Kew, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Against this background, this study argues that Nigerian civilian governments have mastered the appearance of governance without its substance. Constitutional reforms, development agenda, and policy blueprints are routinely produced, yet their implementation is undermined by political actors who benefit from weak institutions. Blueprint creation therefore becomes a symbolic exercise that projects reform while preserving the underlying system of patronage and exclusion. Nation-building remains stalled not because Nigeria lacks ideas, but because institutional integrity threatens entrenched political interests.

Using a qualitative analysis grounded in critical historical institutionalism, this paper examines how formal nation-building mechanisms such as federal character, elections, and oversight institutions are operationally distorted. By focusing on the gap between constitutional intent and political practice, the study shifts attention from policy design to the deeper question of accountability and enforcement. It concludes that meaningful nation-building in Nigeria depends less on new constitutional plans and more on strengthening institutions that can compel compliance, deliver performance, and rebuild public trust.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on critical historical institutionalism, a framework which holds that political institutions are not neutral or purely technical arrangements. Rather, they are products of specific historical moments and power struggles, and they tend to reflect the interests of dominant actors at the time of their formation. Scholars associated with this approach, including Thelen (2014), Mahoney and Thelen (2010), and North *et al.* (2013), argue that institutions are created at critical junctures such as independence, regime transitions, or major political crises. Once established, these institutions follow path-dependent trajectories and are often reshaped or captured by powerful actors who operate within them.

In the Nigerian context, critical historical institutionalism is useful for understanding how foundational political moments continue to shape contemporary governance. The 1999 Constitution, for example, emerged from a military transition process rather than a broad-based civic negotiation. As a result, it retains institutional features and power logics that continue to influence civilian governance, particularly in the concentration of executive authority and the weakness of accountability mechanisms. Within this framework, the study employs the concept of constitutional-operational dissonance to explain the persistent gap between formal political rules and actual political behaviour. This concept refers to the contradiction between the constitutional ideals of accountability, inclusion, and rule-based governance, and the informal practices that dominate political life. These informal practices consist of unwritten rules, shared expectations, and patronage relationships that guide political action more forcefully than formal legal provisions.

This phenomenon is closely linked to what contemporary governance literature describes as patrimonial or clientelist governance, where political authority is exercised through personal loyalty networks rather than impersonal institutions (Khan, 2018; Mustapha, 2021). In Nigeria, this informal governance logic operates as an underlying grammar that structures political behaviour. Consequently, formal constitutional mechanisms are frequently subordinated to favoritism networks, ethnic considerations, and patron-client relations. The outcome is a persistent form of institutional dissonance, defined here as the stark gap between formally established rules and the informal practices through which power is exercised in reality.

Methodology

This study employs a deconstructive qualitative analysis; a methodological approach designed to interrogate established narratives and expose internal contradictions within governance systems. The analysis is grounded primarily in a critical review of secondary sources, including constitutional texts, policy documents, academic literature, and reports by credible civil society and international organisations. To enrich the analysis and substantiate key claims, the study also incorporates limited primary qualitative evidence drawn from informal elite commentaries, publicly available interviews, and documented citizen perspectives reported in reputable media and policy forums. These sources provide contextual insight into how constitutional provisions are experienced and interpreted in everyday political practice. The analysis follows a two-step process:

1. **Textual Analysis:** This involves isolating the stated nation-building objectives within key formal documents (the blueprint). For example, provisions such as the Federal Character Principle in Chapter II, Section 14(3) of the 1999 Constitution are examined for their stated intent to promote national integration.
2. **Praxis Tracing:** This entails mapping documented political conduct, including budgetary allocations, public appointment patterns, electoral practices, and corruption cases, against these stated objectives. In this step, selected citizen reactions and elite statements are used illustratively to demonstrate how informal governance practices contradict constitutional intentions in practice.

By juxtaposing formal constitutional goals with both documented political behaviour and contextual primary insights, this qualitative approach exposes the operational logic that sustains constitutional-operational dissonance. Framed within a critical historical institutionalist perspective, the methodology allows the study to reveal how power relations and informal norms shape governance outcomes in Nigeria without departing from the study's qualitative and interpretive orientation.

Analysis and Discussion

Unintended Consequences of Civilian Governance and National Instability

This section goes beyond listing governance failures to examine how civilian administrations have contributed to Nigeria's ongoing instability. Rather than functioning effectively as agents of nation-building, civilian governments have often used state institutions in ways that weaken national unity. Constitutional and democratic tools, though legally established and publicly justified, are frequently applied in ways that undermine the foundations of a unified nation-state. The problem, therefore, is not the absence of governance structures, but the manner in which they are used.

Constitutional Tools as Sources of Division: Nigeria inherited a constitutional framework intended to manage diversity and promote inclusion in a plural society. However, many of these mechanisms have been applied in ways that deepen division rather than encourage unity. This outcome is not accidental but reflects a political practice that prioritises narrow interests over constitutional values.

Federal Character and Institutionalised Suspicion:

The Federal Character Principle was introduced in the 1999 Constitution to ensure fair representation and reduce fears of domination among Nigeria's diverse groups. In practice, its implementation has increasingly focused on rigid ethnic balancing rather than merit and competence. As a result, public institutions are often perceived not as neutral spaces for national service but as assets to be shared among competing ethnic groups. This reinforces what Ekeh (1975) described as the division between the civic public and the primordial public. Controversies surrounding federal appointments and admissions into unity schools illustrate how federal character has come to symbolise exclusion rather than inclusion. Instead of strengthening national identity, it sends the message that ethnic identity is more important than citizenship.

The Political Economy of Nepotism and State Capture:

Political office in Nigeria attracts intense competition

largely because of the structure of the economy. The state depends heavily on oil revenue rather than taxation, which weakens accountability to citizens. Control of state power therefore becomes the main route to wealth and influence. Joseph's (1987) analysis of nepotism remains relevant, though it has taken new forms in the digital age. Today, corruption often occurs through inflated contracts, abandoned projects, and electronic diversion of public funds. Political elites operate less as public servants and more as managers of access to state resources. As Watts (2004) observes, the Nigerian state functions largely as a revenue distribution system rather than a service-oriented institution. Under this system, elections resemble struggles for economic control rather than contests over public policy.

Electoral Democracy and Ethnic Mobilisation:

Elections are meant to strengthen democracy and national unity through peaceful competition. In Nigeria, however, they often deepen ethnic and religious divisions.

Campaign Practices and Exclusionary Politics:

Political campaigns rarely focus on policy debates or national development plans. Instead, they rely heavily on ethnic and religious appeals. Campaign messages often frame politics as a struggle between "us" and "them." This pattern was especially visible during the 2023 elections, where social media and public discourse were filled with ethnic and religious rhetoric. Such campaigning limits voters' ability to assess candidates on a national basis and reinforces the idea that political power must rotate among ethnic blocs through informal zoning arrangements. This weakens the idea of a shared Nigerian political community.

Electoral Violence as an Economic Activity: Electoral violence in Nigeria is not merely spontaneous. It is often organised and funded by political actors who recruit unemployed youths to intimidate opponents and disrupt elections. This creates a system in which political violence becomes a source of income for marginalised groups. Reports by Human Rights Watch (2007) and later observers show that this practice has long-term consequences. It teaches citizens that power is achieved through force rather than votes and weakens trust in state security institutions. Such conditions are incompatible with nation-building.

Deliberate Weakening of Governance Institutions:

Strong institutions are essential for a functioning nation-state. However, Nigeria's civilian political elite has often weakened key institutions to protect political and economic interests.

Undermining the Electoral Authority: The Independent National Electoral Commission has made some technical improvements, but its independence remains under constant pressure. Problems such as underfunding, partisan appointments, and political interference persist. Elections that are widely viewed as flawed, including those of 2007 and 2023, weaken public confidence in democracy. When citizens believe their votes do not matter, they disengage from the political system, weakening the social contract between the state and society.

Judicialisation of Politics and Loss of Legal Trust: The judiciary plays a vital role in constitutional governance. In Nigeria, however, courts have increasingly become arenas for political struggle. Electoral disputes are routinely settled through litigation, creating the perception that elections are only the first stage of political competition.

When court decisions are seen as overly technical or politically influenced, public trust in the rule of law declines. As Nwabueze (2019) notes, a judiciary perceived as aligned with executive power undermines constitutionalism. This weakens the idea of equal citizenship under the law.

The National Youth Service Corps as a Reflection of National Challenges:

The NYSC was created to promote national unity by exposing young graduates to different cultures. While its objective remains important, the scheme reflects broader social divisions. Concerns about postings to unsafe areas often reveal underlying ethnic and religious fears. In addition, the misuse of NYSC certificates in political contests has damaged the credibility of the programme. The scheme therefore represents a well-intended policy constrained by the same divisions it seeks to address.

The Emerging National Condition: The combined effect of these governance failures is not a collapsed state but one trapped in prolonged uncertainty. Nigeria maintains the formal features of statehood, including armed forces and international recognition, but struggles to exercise full authority within its territory. Armed groups, separatist movements, and criminal networks challenge state control across different regions. For many citizens, daily life involves navigating multiple sources of authority, including the formal state, ethnic networks, religious groups, and local security arrangements. This fragmented experience reflects a political system that has prioritised division over integration. Nigeria remains, as suggested in the title of this paper, a blueprint that has yet to be fully realised, largely because those responsible for implementation benefit from the existing weaknesses.

Conclusion

Nigeria's nation-building challenge has been repeatedly misunderstood as a problem of inadequate planning or constitutional design. This study has shown that the core problem lies not in the absence of policies or frameworks, but in the weak implementation of existing rules and institutions. Civilian governance has produced numerous reforms and development agendas, yet these initiatives have failed to translate into national cohesion because they are undermined by elite control, informal power networks, and poor accountability. To move beyond this cycle, reform efforts must shift from producing new blueprints to strengthening the institutions responsible for enforcement. This shift is both necessary and feasible if approached incrementally and strategically.

Recommendations

This study recommends thus:

Strengthening Oversight and Accountability Institutions

The first practical step is to strengthen existing oversight bodies rather than create new ones. Institutions such as the Office of the Auditor-General, the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission, and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission already have legal mandates. What is required is greater financial independence, transparent appointment processes, and clearer timelines for investigation and prosecution. These reforms can be implemented through targeted legislative amendments and executive compliance, without the need for constitutional overhaul. Prioritising a small number of high-profile cases for timely prosecution would also send a strong signal that accountability is achievable.

Improving Electoral Administration and Legal Certainty

Electoral reform is another area where implementation is possible within current structures. INEC's operational independence can be strengthened by insulating its funding from executive discretion and ensuring that key appointments follow merit-based and bipartisan procedures. Clearer electoral guidelines and stricter enforcement of existing penalties for electoral offences would reduce post-election disputes. In addition, electoral courts should adopt time-bound procedures to limit prolonged litigation. These measures are realistic and build on existing laws rather than introducing complex new systems.

Linking Legitimacy to Performance

A third feasible strategy is to redefine political legitimacy around performance rather than ethnic mobilisation. Governments at federal and state levels can achieve this by setting measurable targets in areas such as security, basic healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Regular public reporting on these outcomes would allow citizens to assess governance based on results. Over time, visible improvements in service delivery can reduce reliance on patronage networks and strengthen trust in public institutions.

Gradual and Practical Reform Path

These recommendations do not require radical institutional replacement or unrealistic political transformation. Instead, they rely on gradual, enforceable reforms that can be implemented within Nigeria's current political framework. While resistance from entrenched interests is likely, incremental progress remains possible where political pressure, civil society engagement, and legal enforcement converge.

Adjunct to the above, Nigeria does not need another constitutional blueprint to complete its nation-building project. What it requires is consistent enforcement of existing rules, credible institutions, and a governance culture that rewards performance and accountability. Nation-building will advance not through ambitious plans on paper, but through practical actions that citizens can see, experience, and trust.

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