**PanAfrican Journal of Governance and Development, Vol. 7, No. 1, February 2026**

# Neopatrimonialism and the Challenges of Democracy in Nigeria: Adaptive Patrimonialism in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Journal Volume & Issue:

Vol. 7, No. 1

pp.86-107

DOI: https://doi.org/10.46404/panjogov.v7i1.7351

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**Abstract**

*The fourth republic which started from 1999 till present represents the Nigeria's longest uninterrupted period of civilian rule. Despite this, democratic consolidation remains incomplete. This article investigates not just howneopatrimonial practices have continued but also, how it has adapted to Nigeria's fourth republic through a hybrid governance system where formal democratic institutions and informal patrimonial structureswork in tandem rather than in opposition. The central question explored is: How have neopatrimonial mechanisms adjusted to civilian rule, and what does this tell us about institutional reform limitations? Through directed qualitative content analysis of peer-reviewed scholarship, institutional documents, governance data, and investigative journalism, the study identifies four adaptive mechanisms: patron-client networks, ethnic favouritism, institutional capture, and rent-seeking. Each mechanism has been reconfigured to operate through rather than be eliminated by democratic institutions. Three key findings emerge: electoral processes now serve as new channels for patrimonial exchange through vote-buying; anti-corruption agencies have become instruments of political competition rather than genuine accountability; and ethnic favouritism now masks itself under meritocratic language. The article argues that without acknowledging how democratic institutions themselves have been repurposed as patrimonial tools, reform efforts will remain superficial. The study contributes to broader debates on hybrid regimes, democratic decline, and the political economy of African governance by pinpointing the mechanisms through which patrimonial practices adapt to and operate through formal democratic institutions.*

**Keywords:** *Democracy, Neopatrimonialism, Adaptive Patrimonialism, Fourth Republic and Patron-client Networks*

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## Introduction

Nigeria was a British colony before it gained its independence in 1960. As a culturally diverse society, the journey toward establishing stable democratic governance has been marked by significant challenges. Post-independence, Nigeria experienced a brief period of democratic rule from 1960 to 1966, before regional tensions, ethnic rivalries, and electoral malpractices led to the first military coup in 1966. Between 1966 and 1999, Nigeria witnessed changes between military and civilian rule. The second republic (1979-1983) and the aborted third republic (1993) were short-term, as both ended in military coups. The Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 intensified pre-existing ethnic tensions and reinforced military dominance in Nigerian politics (Osaghae, 1998). It was in the fourth republic, inaugurated in 1999 and which continuesto the present, that Nigeria began to experience a more sustained period of civilian rule (Suberu, 2001).

Despite the establishment of formal democratic institutions in the fourth republic, which ensure regular elections, civil liberties, an active civil society and constitutional separation of powers, democratic consolidation remains incomplete, as corruption, abuse of power, weak rule of law, and political instability persist. A substantial body of literature has identified neopatrimonialism as a significant barrierto democratic consolidation. Neopatrimonialism is a governance system where formal state institutions coexist with and are subordinated to informal patrimonial structures of personal loyalty and patron-client exchange for private gain (Bratton &Van de Walle, 1994; Erdmann & Engel, 2007; Joseph, 1987).

Numerous scholars, especially Africans, have written extensively on the negative effects of neopatrimonialism on democracy. A thorough review of these works uncovers some limitations. Studies by Nigerian scholars that examined the effects neopatrimonialism in Nigeria's fourth republic (i.e. Suberu, 2007; Omotola, 2010a; Omotola, 2010b; Agbiboa, 2012; Vande, 2022), focuses on persistence rather than adaptation. Limited attention has been devoted to identifying the specific mechanisms through which patrimonial practices have adapted and adjusted to operate through democratic institutions. This article contributes by identifying these adaptation mechanisms and examining how democratic institutions themselves become instruments of patrimonial governance.

## Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyse the specific mechanisms through which neopatrimonial practices have adapted themselves under Nigeria's prolonged civilian rule.
2. To examine how adapted neopatrimonial practices operate through formal democratic institutions in Nigeria's fourth republic.
3. To evaluate the implications of adaptive neopatrimonialism for institutional reform and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

### Research Questions

This study addresses two interconnected questions:

1. Through what specific mechanisms has neopatrimonialism reconfigured itself under Nigeria's prolonged civilian rule?
2. What does the adaptive resilience of neopatrimonialism reveal about the limits of institutional reform in Nigeria's fourth republic?
3. How has adaptive neopatrimonialism shaped the dynamics of institutional reform in Nigeria's fourth republic?

In addressing these questions, this article makes the following contributions. First, it moves beyond the contention that neopatrimonialism persists to specifying and identifying the distinctive adaptation mechanisms that characterise fourth republic patrimonialism in Nigeria. Second, it generates policy implications that move beyond institutional reform and strengthening to target specific strategies of institutional appropriation.

## Conceptual Review

### Neopatrimonialism

Neopatrimonialism is a new form of patrimonialism, whereas the term "patrimonialism" originates from Max Weber's work titled "*In Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*." In the work, Max Weber channelled his analysis of patrimonialism within the theory of authority and bureaucracy. He explores how a person-centred and traditional rule can shape governance structures and political dynamics. He defines patrimonialism as a form of traditional authority where political power is exercised through personal and arbitrary rule, as against rational-legal

authority, where power is institutionalised and governed by established laws and procedures (Weber, 1978; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). In patrimonialism, governance structures flow directly from the leader, who treats the state as their personal property with political authority and economic resources distributed through personal relationships rather than formal bureaucratic channels. Neopatrimonialism is the modern adaptation of patrimonialism, where formal state institutions coexist with patrimonial practices. Weber emphasised that patrimonialism was common in pre-modern societies but could also appear in various forms in modern contexts, especially where traditional and personalistic elements persist within formal political systems (Weber, 1978).

While neopatrimonialism entertains laws, formal structures, and institutions, actual political power and resource distribution are determined by informal personal relationships and patron-client networks. As Bratton and van de Walle (1994, p. 458) observed, "Neopatrimonial regimes are systems where personal loyalty and dependence shape how the state works." They noted that although officials formally operate within legal-rational structures, they frequently exploit their positions for personal and relational gain. Similarly, Erdmann and Engel (2007, p. 97) contend that "Neopatrimonialism blends formal and informal institutions." On paper, decisions follow bureaucratic rules; in practice, they are shaped by personal loyalties and relationships. Mkandawire (2015) went further to assert that neopatrimonialism collapses the distinction between the ruler's office and the public service. Those in power channel public resources toward personal patronage networks and sustain authority through loyal supporters.

In "How does Neopatrimonialism affect the African State?" Soest (2007) argues that while neopatrimonialism can be applied globally, especially in developing nations, many scholars find it especially useful for understanding Africa's weak state institutions, democratic failings, and habitual economic challenges. Nigeria is not an exception in this regard because neopatrimonialism continues to have a strong influence on how politics and public administration in Nigeria work in practice. While it formally returned to democratic rule in 1999 and adopted democratic institutions and procedures, informal patronage networks and personal loyalties still shape the behaviour of political actors and the everyday functioning of the state.

The concept of neopatrimonialism itself has been widely debated among scholars. Mkandawire, in "Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa," argues that the term has become overly deterministic in the sense that, it is often used too loosely to

explain democratic weaknesses in African states, without paying sufficient attention to differences in state capacity and economic performance across countries. (Mkandawire, 2015). Erdmann and Engel (2006) also caution that neopatrimonialism is sometimes applied in a way that assumes formal institutions are merely symbolic, stressing that scholars must carefully examine how formal rules and informal practices interact, rather than dismissing formal institutions altogether. These criticisms inform the approach taken in this study. Instead of viewing neopatrimonialism as a static regime type or a cultural trait, this work treats it as something more flexible and strategic. It is understood as a set of adaptive strategies that political elites adjust in response to changing institutional and political environments. This view draws from Khan's (2010) political settlements framework and Kelsall's (2013) analysis of patrimonialism, which stresses how the distribution of power among competing groups determines which institutions are viable, and the conditions under which patrimonialism can bring economic transformation.

**Adaptive Patrimonialism**

Drawing insights from Erdmann and Engel's (2007) framework of institutional hybridity, Khan's (2010) political settlements approach, and Mkandawire's (2015) critique of neopatrimonialism, this article introduces the concept of adaptive patrimonialism. Adaptive patrimonialism is a form of neopatrimonialism wherein the patrimonial actors strategically modify their practices in response to changing institutional environments while protecting underlying systems of patronage and resource appropriation. Unlike classical neopatrimonialism linked to personalised authority and weak institutions, adaptive patrimonialism operates through formally democratic institutions. Through mechanisms like elections, anti-corruption agencies, procurement systems, and constitutional procedures political actors pursue political and economic advantage.

Adaptive patrimonialism builds upon existing scholarship on institutional hybridity of Erdmann & Engel (2006; 2007), political settlements of Khan (2010), competitive clientelism of Kitschelt & Wilkinson (2007), and hybrid regimes of Levitsky & Way (2010). Its uniqueness lies in emphasising clearly the adaptive capacity of political actors and the appropriation or the use of democratic institutions as instruments for reproducing patrimonial outcomes under a prolonged civilian rule.

## Democracy

Democracy comes from the Greek word *dēmokratia*, which is a combination of "demos" (common people) and "kratos" (strength, power, or rule). Etymologically, democracy means rule by the people (Harper, 2024). It is a system of government where the citizens exercise power by voting. Hence, the government is elected by the people, and political authority is derived from the will of the majority while protecting the rights of minorities. Dahl (1989) defines democracy as a political system that ensures: effective participation, equality in voting, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, and inclusiveness of adults. According to Dahl, "Democracy provides opportunities for effective participation, equality in voting, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, and inclusiveness" (p. 220). Schumpeter offers a procedural or functional definition of democracy, emphasising the role of competitive elections. He states, "Democracy is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide through a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter, 1942; p. 269).

Huntington (1991) defines democracy in terms of the presence of free and fair elections. He asserts, "A political system is democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes" (p. 7). Like Schumpeter (1942), Diamond (2008) builds on the functional aspects of democracy. He pointed out civil liberties and the rule of law as essential components of democracy. He defines democracy as "a system of government with four key components: a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; protection of the human rights of all citizens; and a rule of law which applies equally to all citizens" (Diamond, 2008, p. 21).

Despite the presence of formal electoral processes in Nigeria, issues such as vote-buying, material inducement, ballot stuffing, and violence during elections continue to undermine the credibility of democratic institutions. High levels of corruption among political elites and public officials diminish public trust in government and democratic processes. This article employs Diamond's multidimensional conception of democracy while also recognising that Nigeria practices procedural democracy without its substantive content. The analytical task, therefore, is to explain how patrimonial elites create and adapt procedurally compliant democratic outcomes that still weaken democratic substance.

## Material and Methodology

The article utilises a qualitative directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This helps in analysing existing theory (neopatrimonialism) to identify initial coding categories while remaining open to refining, refuting, and incorporating emerging themes. This approach is well-suited for this study because it shows how a well-theorised phenomenon (neopatrimonialism) is showcased in a new institutional context (i.e., prolonged civilian rule in Nigeria). To capture distinct categories of evidence, the article employs purposive sampling as its strategy and source selection method. The literature materials were obtained from JSTOR, ResearchGate, and Google Scholar databases, covering the period from 1987 to 2024.

Sources were selected based on their relevance to neopatrimonialism, democratic governance, patronage, corruption, clientelism, institutional accountability, and electoral politics in Nigeria. Sources that did not relate to or uncover these themes were excluded. Academic literature served as the primary evidence base, while institutional reports, governance datasets, and investigative journalism sources were used to give rigor, validity and credibility to the phenomenon under study. Search terms used include: neopatrimonialism and Nigeria, patron-client and Nigeria's fourth republic, prebendalism and democracy in Nigeria, and vote-buying and Nigeria. Coding proceeded in three stages. First, deductive codes derived from Bratton and van de Walle's (1994) framework were applied. Second, documents were re-examined to identify recurring patterns not fully captured by the original framework. Third, emergent themes were refined through iterative comparison across sources. This process generated the additional analytical categories of patrimonial democracy and performative reform.

To compare observed Nigerian administrative patterns with neopatrimonial theory's predictions, Yin's (2014) pattern-matching technique was applied. Yin's method, while developed for case-study research, is applicable here as it allows for systematic comparison between observed patterns (from documents) and predicted patterns (from neopatrimonial theory). Pattern-matching indicated where convergence affirmed the framework's explanatory value and where divergence (i.e. the misuse of democratic institutions) required theoretical refinement.

Cross-national and time-series datasets from the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, Afrobarometer Nigeria surveys and Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room election reports were consulted to assess whether observed patterns were national or sub-national.

However, these quantitative data are used contextually to support qualitative claims rather than as primary evidence. Investigative and media sources from Premium Times, BusinessDay, The Cable, and Reuters were incorporated where they contained documented corruption allegations supported by court filings or official inquiry reports relevant to neopatrimonial mechanisms.

It is worth underscoring that the use of qualitative directed content analysis is limited to documented practice (i.e., reliance on secondary and documented data). This is not a minor limitation. Patrimonial exchanges that occur privately or through purely oral transactions cannot be captured or analysed. The analysis, therefore, likely underrepresents the full scale of patrimonial exchange, and claims about the pervasiveness of these mechanisms should be read as conservative estimates based on documented evidence.

## Findings: Mechanisms of Adaptive Patrimonialism in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

This section presents four major neopatrimonial mechanisms employed by the political elites as well as how each mechanism manifests in Nigeria's governance system. The aim is to establish the adaptive character of patrimonialism in Nigeria's fourth republic.

### Patron-Client Networks

Patron-client networks in Nigeria's fourth republic operate through mutual and reciprocal relationships where political elites (patrons) provide resources, opportunities, and protection in exchange for political support and loyalty from voters, contractors, and subordinate officials (clients). Unlike Nigeria's military-era patrimonialism, which focused on a single authority (the military head of state), fourth republic patrimonialism is dispersed and competitive, hence involving different political personnel, offices and institutions.

In Nigeria, elections are often influenced by patron-client underpinnings, where political elites (patrons) intimidate, induce, and manipulate voters (clients) materially and financially to secure their votes. The issue of vote-buying has been common during elections in Nigeria since transitioning to civilian rule in 1999. Kerr (2011) found that 63% of 2,410 Nigerians surveyed by Afrobarometer in 2007 offered a negative evaluation of the electoral process, with the majority pointing towards issues of vote-buying (i.e. giving clothing, food items, job offers, contracts and financial incentives), widespread malpractice, institutional distrust and low public legitimacy. Vande (2022) writes that "monetary inducements have been part of the electoral process in Nigeria in 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections but the incidence of vote buying became so glaring and has

discredited the democratic process in the 2019 general election" (p. 126). Supporting the above, Oladapo, Oyewale, and Abayomi (2020) write that "vote-buying involves the exchange of private material benefits for political support. It is seen as a contract, or perhaps an action in which the voter sells his or her vote to the highest bidder" (p.73).

Beyond elections, patron-client networks penetrate political procedures and appointments. These networks have been documented in public appointments, procurement processes, constituency allocations, and political recruitment structures (Fatile, 2012; Agbiboa, 2012). The military-era patrimonialism was vulnerable to coup-induced leadership change, but fourth republic patrimonialism survives electoral turnover because patronage capacity is distributed across multiple competitive elites, any of whom may be replaced without dismantling the underlying system. Regarding this issue, Fatile (2012) writes that "various reform efforts of the Nigerian government are of limited value. They fail to take into account many of the dynamics that support corruption. While successive administrations have taken partially successful steps to control corruption, these efforts have not fundamentally undermined the supporting environment for corruption in the country" (p. 46).

**Ethnic Favouritism**

Ethnic favouritism (also called ethnocentrism or tribalism) is the act of giving unfair or excessive advantage to individuals based on their ethnic or tribal group, rather than on merit, qualifications, or competence. After patron-client networks, another adaptive mechanism of patrimonialism is that it elevates ethnic affiliation above universally accepted principles such as fairness, equality, and meritocracy (Ilorah, 2009). In their study, *Ethnic Favouritism in Democracy: The Political Economy of Land and Labour in South Africa,* Amodio and Hohmann (2019) explain that ethnic favouritism harms democracy because public offices and resources are shared based on group loyalty rather than the national interest. In simple terms, when leaders choose their friends and allies over competence and fairness, corruption, inefficiency, unequal opportunities, and public distrust in government institutions become inevitable.

In Nigeria's fourth republic, ethnic favouritism did not disappear; it simply changed its form. It evolved from the regional dominance of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the first republic and from the ethnic arrangements that characterised military rule into a subtler, procedural pattern that operates through merit-based systems. For example, Akhigbe (2017) reported that during the

first term of President Muhammadu Buhari, who had earlier ruled as military Head of State (between 1983 and 1985), 81 out of 100 key appointments went to individuals from Northern Nigeria. Although these appointments followed constitutional procedures and were not openly discriminatory, the outcome was heavily regionally focused. This raised serious concerns about compliance with Nigeria's Federal Character Principle, enshrined in Section 14(3) of the 1999 Constitution, which requires equitable representation from all states and geopolitical zones. A thorough look at the current president's (Bola Ahmed Tinubu) appointments, who was elected in 2023, suggests a similar pattern (Oloyede, 2024).

Ethnic favouritism is not limited to political appointments; it has also penetrated and shaped public sector employment. The Nigerian Federal Civil Service, which is meant to operate as a merit-based bureaucracy, has increasingly reflected ethnic considerations over qualifications. According to Chiamogu and Chiamogu (2019), the NFCS service is marked by the dominance of ethnic identity over national identity. This creates a fragmented work environment where suspicion replaces trust, collaboration becomes difficult, and service delivery suffers. Instead of encouraging unity and development, such conditions encourage rivalry, resentment, and political tension, which slow down meaningful reform and national progress.

**Institutional Capture**

The third way through which political elites have sustained patrimonialism is through institutional capture. Unlike the military era when rulers openly dissolved or directly took over institutions, political elites in Nigeria's fourth republic have adopted a different approach. Institutions are not dissolved or dismantled; instead, they are left formally intact but strategically used to advance elite interests. In other words, rather than abolishing them, elites selectively activate and deploy them to achieve preferred outcomes. An example is Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This electoral body has not been rendered irrelevant. It continues to organise its electoral duties and documentation. However, critics argue that it has at times been used in ways that favour the incumbent government while maintaining procedural correctness. Former INEC chairman Maurice Iwu, who chaired INEC, faced significant criticism during the 2007 general election over alleged bias toward the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), contributing to an election widely viewed as flawed (Suberu, 2007). More recently, the chairman of INEC in the 2023 presidential election, Mahmood Yakubu, has been accused by opposition figures of manipulating aspects of the 2023 presidential election in favour of the All Progressives Congress

(Ardo, 2023). In both periods, INEC remained formally independent but critics argue that the manipulations occurred within the institution rather than through its dissolution.

The same pattern can be seen in anti-corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). These institutions have not been relegated; rather, they are often perceived as selectively active. Successive administrations, such as Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari's tenures, have been accused of pursuing corruption cases more aggressively against political opponents while overlooking allegations involving allies (Augé, 2015; Akhigbe, 2017; Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2019); similar criticisms have also surfaced under Bola Ahmed Tinubu (Okocha, 2026). The implications of these are that anti-corruption efforts appear strong on the surface but are weakened in practice, thus undermining their deterrent effect.

The Nigerian judiciary system also displays the same adaptive pattern. Although it is constitutionally independent but, it has faced allegations of political compromise. This is not the same with the military era, when courts were openly subordinated through decrees and special laws that restricted judicial review. In the fourth republic, influence operates more informally through strategic appointments, case-specific interference, and the use of election tribunals as sites of transactional exchange. For example, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2017, p. 16) indicate that bribery prevalence in Nigeria was highest among police officers (46.4%), followed by prosecutors (33.0%) and judges/magistrates (31.5%). Again, public discussions on judicial integrity and transparency have been reinforced by findings cited by the president of the NBA (Nigerian Bar Association), Afam Osigwe, who referred to a joint UNODC–National Bureau of Statistics survey in 2024 reporting that public officials received approximately ₦721 billion (naira) in cash bribes in 2023, with members of the Nigerian judiciary identified as key recipients (Chioma, 2026).

Documented reports by Transparency International (2023) and Igbinadolor (2023) have stressed major concerns about judicial integrity, especially allegations of bribery and corruption in politically sensitive cases. The security agencies are also subject to political control and manipulation. While their official mandates remain unchanged, they are frequently accused of acting in ways that advantage ruling parties during elections. Reports, including those by the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (2019), documented allegations of military interference,

harassment and intimidation of opposition supporters during the 2019 elections, particularly in opposition-dominated areas.

## Rent-Seeking

Rent-seeking is the quest for financial gains through the manipulation of the political and economic environment rather than productive activity. The concept is traceable to Gordon Tullock but was made known by Anne Krueger in her work titled "The Political Economy of the Rent-Seeking Society" (Tullock, 1967; Krueger, 1974). Henderson (2023) writes that rent-seeking involves the notion that "people seek rents when they try to obtain benefits for themselves through the political arena." Krueger (1974) writes that "In many market-oriented economies, government restrictions upon economic activity are pervasive facts of life. These restrictions give rise to rents of a variety of forms, and people often compete for the rents. Sometimes, such competition is perfectly legal. In other instances, rent-seeking takes other forms, such as bribery, corruption, smuggling, and black markets" (p.291).

In Nigeria, rent-seeking activities have undergone significant adaptation in the fourth republic. An example is the Malabu Oil scandal that happened during President Obasanjo's administration. In 2001, President Olusegun Obasanjo revoked Malabu Oil and Gas Company's license and assigned the oil block to Shell Company without a public bid. Court documents later showed that the Malabu Oil and Gas Company was owned by Dan Etete (who was an oil minister during General Sani Abacha's regime), Mohammed Abacha (son of Sani Abacha), and other people close to former military ruler Sani Abacha (Reuters, 2021; Oluwafemi, 2023). The significance of the scandal is not in its occurrence (which is common during Nigeria's military rule) but that it happened under an elected civilian government. The transaction was executed through formal ministerial authority and documented through official legal processes, thereby giving rent-seeking a democratic and procedural form.

The fuel subsidy regime (abolished in 2023) also represented institutionalised rent distribution. Former Central Bank Governor Muhammad Sanusi regarded it as a scam, a means through which the political elites seek rent. He affirms that "the only reason fuel subsidy makes sense is that there are some people who control the levers of power, who are making billions and billions of dollars out of this scam that is called fuel subsidy. Otherwise, there is no reason why government after the government will continue when the damage to the economy is clear" (Oluwafemi, 2021). The

former Minister of State for Petroleum, Timipre Sylva, in an interview, described the Nigerian government's controversial subsidy regime as a criminal enterprise. He asserts, "Fuel subsidy is more or less fueling a criminal economy. The NNPC imports the products, and nobody knows the exact destination of the products at the end of the day. The imported products come to Nigeria, and from there, filter out of our borders to neighbouring countries" (Olawoyin, 2022). Also, the former minister of Aviation, Isa Yuguda, who chaired a 2008–2009 subsidy investigation subcommittee, testified that "subsidy was claimed on pipelines that never existed" (Moyinoluwa, 2023). As Rufus (2025) argues in a study of the political economy of fuel subsidies in Nigeria, the system functioned as a distributive mechanism for elite patronage rather than a genuine welfare policy.

In the area of public procurement, various processes are often manipulated to award contracts to companies owned by or linked to patrons and political elites through kickback arrangements, contract inflation and phantom projects (Agbiboa, 2012; Ogundiya, 2010). It is worth noting that the military-era rent-seeking in Nigeria was characterised by direct extraction, where oil revenues were appropriated, as opposed to institutional mediation that characterises the fourth republic rent-seeking, where rents are extracted through formally legal processes and sophisticated concealment strategies.

## Analysis and Discussion: Toward Adaptive Patrimonialism

The findings above portray how neopatrimonial mechanisms have manifested in Nigeria's fourth republic. Drawing on Mkandawire's (2015) critique of neopatrimonialism as an overly deterministic concept and Erdmann and Engel's (2006) framework of institutional hybridity, this section moves beyond documentation to interpretation, demonstrating the adaptive resilience of neopatrimonialism under Nigeria's civilian rule and what this means about the nature of the Nigerian state.

The first analytical finding is that fourth republic patrimonialism is characterised by the democratisation of patrimonial capacity. It has embedded patrimonial capacity within its democratic structures. Hence, it has dispersed from a single military strongman to multiple elected officials competing within democratic frameworks. Military-era patrimonialism (1966–1979, 1983–1999) was hierarchically concentrated. The military Head of State controlled oil revenues, appointed all senior officials, and could allocate patronage with minimal institutional constraint.

This system was vulnerable to two existential threats: coup-induced leadership change (which occurred repeatedly) and pro-democracy mobilisation (which ultimately terminated military rule). The dispersion from a single military strongman to multiple elected officials has produced a system of competitive patrimonialism where multiple political elites jointly deploy state resources to buildand maintain client networks. It follows that no one singular actor dominates or dictates patrimonial capacity, and one single actor cannot be removed to dismantle the system.

This concept of "competitive patrimonialism" has common features with, but is quite different from, Kitschelt and Wilkinson's (2007) "competitive clientelism." Whereas competitive clientelism focuses on how parties use contingent (or conditional) rewards to secure electoral support, Nigeria's competitive patrimonialism involves a deeper logic of institutional appropriation that moves beyond electoral exchange to include the control of state agencies, the judiciary, and anti-corruption bodies. Whereas Kitschelt and Wilkinson are primarily concerned with party-voter relationships, the Nigerian case demonstrates patrimonial infiltration of the entire governance architecture.

This finding challenges the contention of Bratton and van de Walle's (1994) who hold that neopatrimonialism isan institutional characteristics of a state because in the Nigeria's fourth republic, neopatrimonialism operates at the transactional level with thousands of discrete exchanges between voters and politicians, contractors and ministers, governors and legislators, etc. Hence, the concept of a neopatrimonial regime may be vaguer than it reveals when patrimonial practices are distributed across multiple actors and players operating within formally democratic institutions.

This analysis also deviates from Kelsall's (2013) developmental patrimonialism. While Kelsall argues that under specific conditions (i.e., centralised authority, long time horizons, elite commitment to economic transformation), patrimonialism can be harnessed for developmental purposes, in Nigeria's fourth republic, time horizons are often shortened by electoral uncertainty and weak confidence in electoral institutions. Afrobarometer (2023) reports that a majority of Nigerians support elections as the preferred means of selecting leaders (71%) and favour a competitive multiparty system (69%), but substantial proportions of Nigerians also believe that elections do not effectively enable citizens to remove underperforming leaders (77%) or ensure that legislators reflect voters' preferences (70%). Trust in the Independent National Electoral

Commission (INEC) is also low, with only 23% expressing confidence in the electoral body whereas 78% report little or no trust in it.

The above perceptions suggest that Nigeria's electoral environment is characterised by uncertainty, limited institutional trust, and concerns about democratic accountability, the conditions that may encourage political actors to prioritise short-term political survival over long-term developmental planning. Nigeria's dispersed and competitive patrimonialism shows none of these enabling conditions listed by Kelsall and therefore represents a case of non-developmental dispersed patrimonialism because authority is fragmented, time horizons are shortened by electoral uncertainty, and elite commitment is directed toward personal accumulation and enrichment rather than national transformation.

The second analytical finding is that Nigeria's political elite have not ignored or dismantled democratic institutions because a democratic government cannot run without democratic institutions. They have occupied and learned how to use these institutions to their advantage. Institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), and the judiciary are still relevant but, they are often used selectively in ways that help legitimise outcomes that favour entrenched political networks and interests. This shows a more refined form of adaptation because during military rule, patrimonialism operated largely outside formal institutions, relying on decrees, special laws, and the direct subordination of courts but in the fourth republic, patrimonial practices now operate through formal democratic institutions rather than outside them.For example, electoral bodies conduct elections that appear procedurally correct (i.e. voting takes place, ballots are counted, and results are announced) but manipulation occurs earlier in the process through voter registration irregularities, delays in transmitting results and the selective accreditation of observers. Also, anti-corruption agencies prosecute political opponents while shielding allies while presenting the framework of formally neutral legal procedures. In the same hand, procurement agencies approve inflated contracts through bidding processes that appear to technically comply with established rules.

From the above, institutional appropriation operates through three main mechanisms: First is procedural compliance with substantive subversion, where institutions follow the required rules on paper, but outcomes are distorted essentially. For example, INEC's 2023 election results were

procedurally compliant, yet opposition parties alleged that result uploads were manipulated via the electronic transmission system (Ardo, 2023). Second is discretionary activation. Agencies such as the EFCC have broad investigative powers, but the decision about whom to investigate, when to act, and how much effort to commit give rooms for selective enforcement. This is shown in Augé (2015) where EFCC aggressively prosecuted opposition figures under the Jonathan administrationbut are reluctant to acton ruling party figures. Third is reform absorption. When institutional weaknesses are exposed and reforms are introduced, political elites adapt once again. Following international criticism of INEC's 2015 manual collation system, the Commission introduced electronic transmission for 2023, yet critics argue elites learned to manipulate the new system rather than being constrained by it (Madueke & Enyiazu, 2025). This finding necessitates refinement of Erdmann and Engel's (2006) institutional hybridity framework. The Nigerian case demonstrates that the relationship between formal and informal institutions is not merely one of coexistence but a strategic appropriation where formal institutions are not a facade behind which patrimonialism operates but active instruments through which patrimonialism operates.

The third analytical finding addresses the puzzle of Nigeria's continuous deferred democratic consolidation. For over twenty years of civilian rule, Nigeria is still struggling with consolidating democracy. This article argues that the transition itself serves elite interests. The narrative of incomplete democratisation justifies continued exceptional measures such as centralised executive power, weak legislative oversight, and the delay of accountability mechanisms. Each successive election is framed as critical to consolidation, and each reform initiative is presented as the final step toward democratic maturity, but consolidation perpetually declines. This agrees with Carothers's (2002) critique of the "transition paradigm," which observed that many countries had become stuck in a "grey zone" between democracy and authoritarianism. It also connects Levitsky and Way's (2010) concept of "competitive authoritarianism," where democratic institutions exist but are systematically designed to favour incumbents.

Khan's (2010) political settlements framework explains Nigeria's situation better. It places Nigeria at a stable low-level equilibrium where no single faction can impose institutional discipline, whereas multiple factions can block reforms that would threaten patrimonial access. Hence, democratic consolidation which would result to stable reproduction of rational-legal authority and competitive electoral accountability threatens this equilibrium. Therefore, implementing reforms with no lasting substance serves the interest of major political actors. The idea of implementing

reforms that indicate compliance with democratic norms but preserve patrimonial structures is termed performative reform in this study. With regard to democratic consolidation, Omotola (2010b) argues that Nigerian political parties have major roles to play. She affirms that political parties could become vehicles of consolidation if appropriately reformed and vice versa. The political settlements analysis suggests a more structural constraint: the distribution of power among contending factions is inconsistent with sustained institutional discipline. The implication is that reform is not difficult but is opposed by actors whose patrimonial access depends on institutional weakness. From the analysis above, the concept that captures the essential characteristics of Nigeria's fourth republic patrimonialism is adaptive patrimonialism, defined as a system where patrimonial capacity is dispersed across multiple competitive elites, democratic institutions are appropriated as patrimonial instruments, institutional reforms are absorbed and neutralised through procedural compliance, and procedurally correct democratic outcomes are produced in ways that undermine democratic substance.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

Nigeria's fourth republic represents a distinctive political formation where a democratic system produces undemocratic governance. This is not a democratic failure but a democratic appropriation because the institutions of electoral democracy have been captured, internalised, and redeployed as instruments of patrimonial control. Without understanding neopatrimonial mechanisms, their adaptation strategy and resilience, economic and political reform will continue to fail so long as they address symptoms rather than the adaptive logic that sustains the system. This article answered the question of why civilian rule has failed to dismantle neopatrimonial governance in Nigeria by analysing how neopatrimonialism has adapted rather than being displaced by democratic institutions.

The study makes two contributions to scholarship on neopatrimonialism and Nigerian governance. First, it provides evidence of how neopatrimonial mechanisms have realigned themselves under Nigeria's prolonged civilian rule. It demonstrates that patron-client networks have shifted from hierarchical command to transactional exchange; ethnic favouritism has evolved from overt discrimination to procedural bias; institutional control has moved from structural capture to selective activation; and rent-seeking has transformed from crude extraction to institutionally-

mediated rent distribution. These adaptations are not just progressive; they represent an evolution on how patrimonialism operates. Second, the article demonstrates the value of mechanism specification and temporal comparison in neopatrimonialism research. By comparing Nigeria's fourth republic (contemporary practices) against military-era patterns, the analysis exposes adaptation that would be invisible in synchronic research designs. This approach responds to Mkandawire's (2015) critique of neopatrimonialism as a static, essentialist category by demonstrating how patrimonial practices evolve in response to changing institutional environments.

Future research on neopatrimonialism should focus on whether the patterns of adaptive patrimonialism identified in Nigeria are also present in other African democracies, i.e. Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, and South Africa, etc. These cases are particularly suitable because they combine sustained electoral competition with varying levels of institutionalisation, allowing a comparative assessment of whether adaptive patrimonialism is specific to Nigeria or characteristic of broader African democratic experiences. It will also examine how ordinary citizens navigate, resist, or sometimes accommodate patrimonial demands through the acceptance of financial and non-financial inducements.

A tension must be acknowledged between the recommendations below and the political settlements analysis presented earlier. The analysis argued that Nigeria's stable low-level equilibrium is structurally resistant to reform because major political actors rationally oppose changes that would threaten their patrimonial access. The recommendations that follow, including constitutional amendments, legislation removing prosecutorial discretion, and mandatory minimum sentences, presuppose precisely the kind of elite commitment to rule-of-law norms that the analysis suggests is absent. The recommendations are therefore best understood as options that depend on either a significant shift in the distribution of power among contending factions, sustained external pressure, or an exogenous shock (economic crisis, mass mobilisation) that alters elite incentives. Without such conditions, the adaptive patrimonial system is likely to absorb and neutralise these reforms as it has done previously.

**Recommendations**

The article analysis shows that neopatrimonialism in Nigeria's fourth republic operates through the appropriation of democratic institutions, not their avoidance. Hence, to target specific

adaptation mechanisms of neopatrimonialism (identified in the findings and analysis sections), this article makes the following recommendations:

First, recent anti-vote-buying efforts focus more on election day transactions, whereas the patrimonial electoral relationships are cultivated between elections through constituency projects, discretionary poverty alleviation schemes, election day cash inducements and targeted appointments. To overcome this, federal legislation should be passed criminalising the use of poverty alleviation funds for partisan mobilisation with mandatory minimum sentences. The legislation should explicitly prohibit the distribution of such benefits within 90 days of an election. Also, all constituency project allocations should be digitised and publicly archived with real-time expenditure tracking, searchable by constituency and legislator, with real-time upload of payment certificates and completion certifications. Furthermore, thediscretionary appointment powers of governors and the president should be removedwith legislation requiring all such appointments to be filled through open, competitive examination conducted by the Federal Civil Service Commission, with appointment decisions subject to legislative confirmation.

Second, anti-corruption agencies such as the EFCC and ICPC have been weaponised as instruments of political competition to open investigations against opponents while shielding allies. In Nigeria today, the Attorney-General and anti-corruption agencies exercise discretion over which cases to prosecute. This discretion empowers selective enforcement. Therefore, legislation should be made mandatingautomatic prosecution upon certification by investigating agencies that prima facie evidence exists, removing political discretion. The legislation removing this discretion would require robust judicial oversight and safeguards against malicious prosecution to prevent the risk of prosecutorial overreach and the erosion of prosecutorial independence.

Third, ethnic favouritism has continued in Nigeria despite Federal Character provisions enshrined in the constitution. Lack of penalties and weak enforcement mechanisms encouraged this trend and has now moved from formal policy to informal practice. To overcome this, the Nigerian constitution should be amended to designate Federal Character violations as impeachable offences, establish an Ethnic Audit Commission with powers to nullify appointments violating merit-based quotas and mandate publication of all federal appointments with regional and ethnic demographic data to enable civil society monitoring.

Finally, civil society organisations that perform essential watchdog functions operate under legal harassment and limited public reach. Also, civic education in Nigeria's educational system has not sufficiently focused on the mechanisms of patrimonial appropriation. Hence, curriculum reform should include dedicated modules on vote-buying, ethnic bias, procurement corruption, and citizen strategies for resistance. Also, comprehensive data protection legislation should be passed to provide a protected digital space for journalists and activists.

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