

Toxic Elite Consensus and Leadership Gaps as the Main Driver of Nigeria's Crisis of Nationhood¹

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Abstract:

The 61 years of Nigeria's post-colonial political history has been one of different unending experiments to create a sustainable political and economic order that serves the Nigerian people. During this period, Nigeria has witnessed violent and unconstitutional political changes, long periods of military dictatorships, persistent cycles of electoral violence, inter and intra ethnic conflicts, and persistent economic and social policy reversals that have worsened Nigeria's performance on almost all socio-economic indicators and the latest security challenges that have created doubt about the viability of the Nigerian state.

Against this backdrop, this paper undertakes a historical analysis of the composition and capacity of the different elite clusters in Nigeria and how these clusters have impacted governance and the sustainability of Nigerian statehood. The paper also investigates the link between Nigeria's current security crisis and the failure of governance that is underpinned by a toxic and extractive elite consensus and failure of leadership across the board. The paper adopts qualitative historical analysis and recommends the creation of a positive and developmental elite governance pact as one of the sustainable ways of addressing the looming implosion of the Nigerian state.

Keywords:

Nigeria, elite consensus,
state failure, corruption.

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Introduction

Nigeria stands imperilled more than before by a quartet of security crises driven by the activities of armed non-state actors; economic failures worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic; unwieldy demographic growth; and the weaponization of ethnic and religious differences by a political elite that is more fixated on power retention than the welfare and economic prosperity of the Nigerian people. The composite of these threats is a permanently unsteady state, marked more by disarray and the burdens of its internal contradictions.

Nigeria in the last decade has performed poorly on almost all indicators benchmarking public safety and security. On the 2021 safety and security sub-index of the Global Prosperity Index, Nigeria ranked 143 out of the 167 countries polled (Legatum Institute, 2021). On the World Bank's political stability and absence of violence component of the Worldwide Governance Indicators, Nigeria scored 4.72 out of the 100 gradable scores (World Bank, 2020). In a decade of measurement, Nigeria witnessed a decline on the Security and Rule of Law component of the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2020).

The real-life impact of these quantitative indexes is no less atrocious. Boko Haram, in a decade of fundamentalist insurgency, caused between 20,000 to 30,000 deaths and displaced more than 2 million Nigerian citizens (Omenma et al., 2020). Banditry is the latest addition to Nigeria's long growing list of public safety and security concerns. In 2019, bandits were reportedly responsible for more Nigerian deaths than Boko Haram, armed robbers, kidnappers, and gangs combined: 47.5% of all violent deaths in 2019 (Daily Trust, 2019). The ongoing conflict between farmers and pastoralists across Nigeria costs at least \$14 billion dollars in potential revenues, annually (Ogundipe and Oluwole, 2016) and between 2011 and 2020, Nigerians paid at least \$18.34 million dollars as ransom to kidnappers (Kabir, 2020).

Elite Theories in Perspective

Understanding the roles and position of elites in governance and power relations in contemporary society has been one of the fundamental areas of interest for sociologists and political scientists. This interest is heightened by the concentration, in the last five decades, of economic and social resources in the restricted circle of few individuals. The world's richest 1%, who are those with \$1million and above, own 45.8% of the world's wealth (Credit Suisse, 2021). Also, the richest 10% of adults in the world own 85% of global household wealth, while the bottom half collectively owns barely 1% (Davies et al., 2006).

Vilfredo Pareto's (Pareto, 1991) *Circulation of Elites*, Gaetano Mosca's theories of Ruling Class (Meisel, 1962), and Robert Michels's theory of the Iron law of Oligarchy (James, 1995) are the seminal treatises on which the scholarship of elite theory is built. Pareto advanced the position that elites – except for short interregnums – have always governed societies and framed cultures. Pareto further conceptualised history as: “[H]istory of men is the history of

the continuous replacement of certain elites; as one ascends another declines, such is the real phenomenon, though to us it may often appear under another form” (Pareto, 1991).

Essentially, there are three groups of governing elites. The first categorisation comprises leaders who directly or indirectly hold positions in government. The second class is the non-political leadership cluster that wields economic, social, and cultural influences, and the third are the non-office holding political elite with major influence on the exercise of political power. These elite groups are neither hermetic nor homogeneous, as class circulation and mobility is a dominant feature of elites in modern societies, with constant changes in the membership structure and composition of elite groups. This is a phenomenon that is tagged: the law of the circulation of elites (Pareto, 1963).

Mosca, building on Pareto’s earlier works in the ‘Theory of Ruling Class’ posits that there are, at every point in history and in almost all human societies, two classes of people – a class ruler and a class that is ruled. Central to Mosca’s elite theory is the principle of the organisation strength and superiority that an organised minority class have over the unorganised majority. This organised minority consists of ruling classes, however, this does not mean that the interest of ruling class and subject classes are always exclusive (Mosca, 1939).

Adding a different dimension to the classic theories of elites, Michels theorised that organisations are the sole method of creating a sustainable and functional governance system and that they all work under the ‘Iron Law of Oligarchy’. In advancing the indispensability of oligarchy from governance, Michels argues that: “It is organisation which gives birth to the domination of the elected over electors, of the mandates over the mandators, of the delegates over delegators; who says organisation, says oligarchy”. According to him, social and political organisations are managed and run by few individuals and that all organisations are elitist.

The works of these pioneer scholars on elite theory have been deepened by a succeeding generation of scholars – William Domhoff, Elmer Eric Schattschneider, C. Wright Mills, James Burnham, Thomas Dye, George Gonzalez, and Martin Gilens, among others, who have extended the boundaries of elite theory. However, there is little disagreement among them about what the theory entails: the dominance of a small minority, consisting of economic elites, political elites, social elites, and policy planning networks in governance and the power held by this exclusive group is independent of democratic processes (Yamokoski and Dubrow, 2008).

While most theories on elites agree on the conceptualisation and group classification of elites, framing the concept of elite consensus is a bit more contentious, as the definitions and meaning of elite consensus is imprecise, with the concept used more descriptively of social and political processes. Gould and Szomolanyi (2000) described elite consensus as indicators that show whether elites share similar values and beliefs systems and their access to crucial decision-making.



Building elite consensus is a complex task that is an outcome of systemic incentives associated with participation in a formal alliance (Kreps, 2010). Elites as rational actors balance the cost and benefit of alliance formulation by exploring benefits from historical perspectives, the prospect of future returns as well as the punishment costs of abstaining (Akinbode, 2017). The basics of decision-making is straightforward; a negative response when the costs outweigh the incentives to form an alliance and vice versa.

Characterisation of Nigeria's Ruling Elites

Nigeria's 61 years of political independence can be condensed into a sentence – unending social and political experiments to create a sustainable political and economic order to replace a burdensome colonial inheritance. Nigeria has witnessed violent and unconstitutional changes in government, decades of military dictatorships, predictable cycles of electoral violence, inter and intra ethnic conflicts, unbelievable levels of public corruption, persistent economic and social policy reversals and the last two decades have seen the rise of armed and violent non-state actors which have resulted in Nigeria's poor performance on almost all development indexes.

These manifest calamities of governance are underpinned by questions of Nigeria's elite composition and nature of agreement between the various elite clusters that have shaped the economic and political outlook of the Nigerian state in the last six decades. Neither exclusive nor hermetic, governing elites in Nigeria can be aggregated into five clusters, namely: the socio-cultural, religious, military, economic, and political and these composite elite groups influence the functioning of social networks, state institutions and political structures (Ani Kifordu, 2011a).

An analysis of Nigeria's recent political and social history reveals that knowledge, resources, psychology, networking, and organisational capability form the basis of the cohesion, visibility, and continuous hold of Nigeria's elite class on the political system. In each of the above listed elite compartments, certain names and personages have come to be identified as embodying the class *essentials*. For instance, Alhaji Aliko Dangote, Abdul Samad Rabiu, and Mike Adenuga, who have a joint net worth of \$27.6 billion, are the quintessential faces of Nigeria's economic elites (Oluwole, 2022). The same way President Obasanjo, General Babagida, and, to a large extent, former governor of Lagos State, Ahmed Tinubu emblemises the political elite and access to political office in Nigeria.

While the Nigerian constitution does not give preference to any religion, the practice of every successive government in Nigeria gives the impression of a country whose government has an inclination towards Islamic and Christian faiths. This official leaning towards the two faiths have created a powerful and distinct elite group who hold great influence on governance in Nigeria (Magbadelo, 2003). The Pentecostal Christian movement has had great influence on electoral outcomes in Nigeria, particularly since 1999. Pastor Enoch Adeboye,

together with the Redeemed Christian Church of God that he leads, a denomination with more than five million worshippers, was adopted by President Obasanjo between 1999-2007 as his spiritual leader and his church to legitimise his government, which further highlights the influence the clerical elites have over governance in Nigeria (Obadare, 2007).

Looking at composition and character of the Nigerian elite – especially the political elite – that have historically held and currently hold offices across Nigeria, it can be stated that the usurpation of political power and diversion of development from the citizenry is one of the fundamental elite consensuses in Nigeria. One factual manifestation of this consensus to divert and hold economic and political power is the failure of successive governments to stop corruption despite the various measures and approaches to address corruption in the polity, some of which include constitutional and legal approach, institutional approach, media campaigns, aggressive policing, and political education approach. Despite these measures, the country has consistently performed poorly on almost all corruption measurement indexes.

There is an age-long and widely held perception of public office in Nigeria as a legitimate and primary source of wealth accumulation and redistribution (Enweremadu, 2013). Nothing exemplifies this than the number of political office holders that have been accused of corruption related offences in Nigeria from 2007 till date. James Ibori, former Governor of Delta State, was arrested by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and was charged with 170 counts of corruption related offences; he was acquitted by a court in Nigeria (Eboh, 2009), only for him to plead guilty for the same offences in the United Kingdom in 2012 (BBC, 2012). Former governors Lucky Igbinedion of Edo state, Ayo Fayose of Ekiti state, Peter Odili of Rivers state, Chimaroke Nnamani of Enugu state, Saminu Turaki of Jigawa state, Orji Uzor Kalu of Abia state, Jonah Jang of Plateau state, James Ibori of Delta state, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha of Bayelsa state, Jolly Nyame of Taraba state, Sule Lamido of Jigawa State, and Ikedi Ohakim of Imo state have all been accused by the Economic and Financial Crime Commission of misappropriating public funds and have been charged to court. Around 22 former governors are being investigated currently and six former governors have been convicted of corruption related offences (PM News, 2019).

Another manifestation of Nigeria's elite is the substantial reliance on state power and institutions for *survival* rather than on the feedback from the Nigerian social structures whose diverse members clamour for elite responsiveness and responsibility. Scholars on political leadership in Nigeria have unanimously concluded that electing the right political leadership is one of Nigeria's great failings. According to Imhonopi and Ugochukwu (2013): "Nigeria has not had the good fortune of being governed well since it gained its political independence in 1960". Also, Ebegbulem (2012) described leadership in Nigeria in uncharitable terms by stating that: "The Nigerian society has never been well governed since independence from the British in 1960 because good, strong leaders have never been in charge".



Another feature of the Nigerian elite class is the continuous circulation and recurrent appearances of members in spite of the many structural changes in the Nigerian polity. Nigeria's latest round of democratisation process has seen domination of the political system by former military leaders and their acolytes at the national and sub-national levels. This elite circulation and replication are not limited to the political elites alone: religious and economic elites have also kept the organisational leadership *within the family*. Religious leaders have been succeeded by their wives and children as heads of religious organisations (BBC, 2021).

According to Ani Kifordu (2011b), there is a certain relationship between historically entrenched value systems and interests that informs the political conduct of the core political executive elite and the denial of opportunities to new groups. The greater the influence of a small number of individuals or groups in society, the more the rights of others – and the openness of the political system, inclusiveness, and the rule of law – may come under pressure. The outcome is the cyclical reproduction of elites in Nigeria across clusters and this is done majorly by exploiting common backgrounds and social networks.

Essentially, the main drivers of the five Nigerian elite clusters are personalised individual and group benefits rather than nationalistic motives. Elites in Nigeria collaborate across institutional and political lines whenever their vested and collective interests are threatened. Nigeria's religious and ethnic diversity has had little impact on existing implicit consensus among Nigerian elites; an elite pact that is built around a set of negative, anti-development, extractive, rent seeking rules (Ojukwu and Shopeju, 2010). Diversity is most weaponised by excluded elite groups as a tool to access power but never as an impediment to collaboration where interests align.

Crisis of Leadership as the Driver of Insecurity

Across the world, governments – irrespective of their nomenclature – have the primary mandate of providing critical public goods and services that private individuals and private networks cannot and are not expected to effectively provide. These goods and services would include: regulatory enforcements, provision of security and safety services, infrastructural development, revenue mobilisation, and budget management, among others. The degree of the efficiency of a government in providing these essential public goods and services determine where it sits on the development spectrum. This efficiency in delivery of public goods and services is referred to as *government effectiveness* in literature and global indexes for measuring performance of governments, and the quality of leadership is always a constant component (Kaufmann et al., 2010). The quality of leadership is essential and central to any discourse on effectiveness of government.

The concept of leadership is multi-disciplinary and one of its distinguishing characterisations in literature is the lack of a uniform definition, with each discipline defining leadership from a subjective perspective. There is a catalogue of definitions, each relevant to

a given situation and purpose but all lacking the cross-discipline quality that makes it usable in all contexts for which leadership is required.

Definitions of leadership can be subsumed under at least eight different categorisations and will include definitions that consider leadership as the focus of group processes, which sees the leader as the centre of a group. The secondary categorisations are those definitions that consider leadership as personality and its effect in framing outcomes. The third class of leadership definitions conceptualise leadership as the art of inducing and enforcing compliance and loyalty. The fourth class of definitions consider leadership as the exercise of influence and focuses on how leaders influence the actions of their followers. The fifth grouping defines leadership as an act or behaviour and examines the concrete actions taken by leaders, rather than character traits of office holders. The sixth takes leadership to be persuasion, a moulder of consensus and the seventh, which realistically mirrors political leadership, puts leadership as power relations and the eighth conceptualisation considers leadership as structural and emphasises that the role of the leader is setting patterns of relationship (Dion, 1968).

In the context of this essay, 'leadership' connotes political powers vested in office holders by the electorate and the demanded natural qualities and requisite intellectual preparations expected from a person that would lead in a political entity. This would include abjuring sectional divisive interests for national good, dispensing justice fairly and not with political expediency, respecting and protecting the essential democratic norm of decent competition and opposition, abstaining from co-opting the security and state for personal ends, taking the observance of the dictates of the rule of law beyond the mouthing of convenient platitudes, and a thorough understanding of the immensity of the Nigerian challenge of development.

Scholars on political leadership in Nigeria have unanimously concluded on the failure of leadership as the primary challenge to economic growth and development in Nigeria prior to 1999 (Achebe, 1983). The same verdict of incompetence, sectionalism, and abysmally poor leadership skills have been given on succeeding class of political leadership since 1999, Nigeria's longest span of democratic governance. One of the critical outcomes of this leadership failure is the current worsening security crisis that has put Nigeria in the global list of failing states.

Whether Nigeria will completely fail and implode is debatable. However, a country imperilled by weak state capacity, ecological and climate emergencies, weakening – and in some instances total collapse –, informal conflict resolution mechanisms, endemic poverty and widening inequality, intractable conflicts around access to natural resources, ethnic fissures and religious intolerance, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, illiteracy, public corruption, and a youth bulge that has been described by a former Nigerian president as "Driven by frustration and desperation in relation to their unfulfilled aspirations and dreams" (Coffie-Gyamfi, 2017) is one that is failing.



Nigeria has a long history of violent conflicts dating back to the 1960s and the return to democratic governance in 1999 saw a rise in violent non-state actors and their domination of national and sub-national security agendas. Today, these armed non-state actors include ethnic militants, gangs and cult groups, political thugs, and others: almost all geopolitical zones across Nigeria are affected (Ososona, 2021). In the northeast, ongoing Boko Haram carnage have devastated communities for more than a decade, banditry is raging in the northwest, cult and gang violence in the southwest and Niger Delta, farmer-pastoralist in the northcentral and secessionist violence in the southeast, and a thoroughly militarised state but nonetheless insecure.

The roles that critical gaps in leadership have played in triggering and aggravating these security challenges is enormous. In 2020, Nigeria emerged as the poverty capital of the world. Northeast Nigeria, the region most affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, is very poor, even by Nigeria's low standards. The region is blighted by unbelievable poverty; states in the region have as much as 71% of their respective populations living below the poverty line (NBS, 2020), and health outcomes are ghastly across the seven component states in the region. The region has the highest number of schoolchildren in Nigeria, with an average adult literacy rate of 29.7%. Youth unemployment in the region is one of the highest in Nigeria (Premium Times, 2019). These poor socio-economic outcomes highlight the direness of responsive and accountable governance systems in the region.

In Northwest Nigeria, the geopolitical zone at the edge of the Sahara and the current epicentre of banditry, is the poorest region in Nigeria. States in the region have as much as between 74% to 87.7% of their respective populations living below the poverty line (NBS, 2020), and health outcomes are extremely brutal across the seven component states in the region. 10.5 million children, which is a full one-third of Nigerian children, are out of school; the highest out of school rate in the world (UNICEF, 2022). These poor socio-economic outcomes are driven by failure of leadership across all strata of public life.

Urban centres across Nigeria are blighted by cultism and gang violence, which is largely driven by Nigeria's abysmal socio-economic indexes – high urban youth employment, high incidence of poverty, lack of opportunities, and a dysfunctional criminal justice system, among others. Added to that is a lack of coherent national strategy for disrupting and dismantling violent gangs in Nigeria, and there is no visible national policy on school-based violence, leaving individual schools and communities to respond uncoordinatedly to a national tragedy (Ososona, 2019).

Elite Consensus and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Elites are a prominent feature of the governance landscape in functional democracies, where the electorates have a wide influence on policy decisions. Democratic governance is built on popular support as well as elite support in order to sustain their legitimacy, preserve stability,

and perform vital functions. A certain level of support for political and social institutions is important in established democracies, especially in states transiting from authoritarian rule and state economic planning to democracy and a free market economy (Gulbrandsen and Engelstad, 2005).

Even in democratic systems that inherently promote equality and universal suffrage, elites do not disappear; they at best acquire a new outlook. Elites in a democracy remain institutionally distinct, although socially disparate and politically diverse groups of national leaders. Mutual accommodation, compromises, and consensus between these elite groups are seen as preconditions for the continuance and stability of democracies (Higley and Michael, 1989).

The impact of positive compromise and consensus is heightened by the social interconnectedness and interdependencies between the various institutions of governance in a democracy that make governance akin to an ecological system, where component parts are connected. The effective and efficient functioning of each institution of governance depends on the functioning of other reinforcing institutions, which in part elevates the rationale why elites must create a framework that transcends their immediate institutional interests and values. Largely, elites have a duty to develop and shoulder responsibilities for deepening institutional capabilities.

The centrality of elite consensus looms larger in Nigeria where the impact of informal institutions is elevated and indispensable to governance outcomes. Informal institutions in Nigeria are often “invisible, irregular, parallel, non-structured, backward, underground and residual and yet these are structures, mechanisms and processes as well as rules and norms that govern and bind social interactions” (Magbagbeola, 1996). These institutions and their schematics are based on mostly unwritten codes of conduct whose enforcement relies heavily on fiduciary relationships, networks, enlightened self-interest, and other mutually reinforcing mechanisms of responsibility. These institutions would include aspects of traditional culture, personal networks, religious organisations and practices, clientelism and godfatherism, ethnic organisations, criminal networks, civil society, and a wide variety of legislative, judicial, and bureaucratic norms (Effiom and Ubi, 2015). More importantly, these institutions have been no less influential in moulding policy choices than formal institutions, like the security apparatus, judicial establishments, and statutory organisations.

From the foregoing, one can observe that the importance of elite consensus is a critical factor to moving the Nigerian polity away from suboptimal social, economic, and political paradigms. It needs to be understood that elite consensus in Nigeria exists, but it *prioritises* extraction, exclusion, rent seeking, and conspicuous consumption to the detriment of the development of the state – development here, being the strengthening of institutions, reduction of inequality and improvement of the quality of democracy, etc. The need for an elite consensus – a meeting of minds – is crucial because they possess a level of concentrated social capital that has the capacity to influence the apparatus of government and even social



consciousness. This does not presuppose a complete disappearance of governance problems, of course, but the emergence of a consensus among elites – who are powerful, wealthy, and influential – would mean that there would be a potential for the transformation of institutions. In this context, institutions are the formal and informal rules, codes, and norms that govern human interaction, and it is these institutions and their emergent properties the latter that are the driving forces of change. For instance, a competent and professional Civil service is the knife point of a government, as they execute the policy of Political officeholders. Where this bureaucracy is set within a culture of extractive tendencies, the result will be a state unable to carry out basic functions. The ability of an elite to unite along developmental norms could influence a Civil service in very noticeable ways.

The Vice President, Yemi Osinbajo, in recognising the indispensable nature of harmony among elites, took the position that the lack of a socially responsible pact that recognised the principle of “*noblesse oblige*” among other things, was the cause of the rise in insecurity. This is premised on the understanding that there are norms of compromise and consensus that ought to guide elites to forge a stable and egalitarian society (Osinbajo, 2021). This means that a pact exists, but it is anti-developmental. Awoyemi noted that this state of affairs was not new but had precedent in Nigerian history with the emergence of the Macpherson Constitution, which was based on a consensus but ultimately implemented by elites that did not trust each other (Awoyemi, 2021). History, as it has been said, often repeats itself.

Conclusion

The last two decades of democratisation in Nigeria has shown that economic growth and development is not necessarily a natural outcome of democratic governance, because the link between the two is not linear. The political system in and of itself does not determine the growth prospects of an economy; economic growth is a product of different mechanisms translating preferences of decision-makers into policy designs that reflect the subtleties of each system. History shows that nearly all poor countries in the 1960s were autocratic, some leaders managed to steer their states to prosperity, while others remained poor. This evidence suggests that it is the choices made by political leaders, rather than the structural constraints, that have enabled nations to move from poverty to prosperity. This particularly emphasises the importance of leadership in addressing national challenges be it developmental or existential.

In the context of this article, unless political leadership in Nigeria manifested in practice the proper use of political powers vested in office holders by the electorates and leaders possessed the requisite natural qualities and needed intellectual preparations – expected from a person that would lead in a complex political entity –, socio-economic failures would continue to threaten national security. Leaders at all facets of public life must avoid sectional divisive interests for national good, dispense justice fairly and not with political expediency, respect and protect the essential democratic norms of decent competition and opposition,

not co-opting the security and state for personal ends, taking the observance of the dictates of the rule of law beyond the mouthing of convenient platitudes, and a thorough understanding of the immensity of the Nigerian Challenge.

Except Nigeria's governing elites produce a governance pact that prioritises this governance ethos, socio-economic development and security would only be aspirational, because these concepts are unfortunately not accidental accomplishments, unlike the Darwinian conjecture of order and beauty out of pure fortuitous arbitrariness.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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