



Institutional Weakness and the Problem of the Nigerian Democracy: A Study of the National Assembly

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ABSTRACT

This study examined institutional weakness and the problem of Nigerian democracy with a particular focus on the National Assembly. The research adopted a descriptive design and relied on qualitative methods using secondary data sourced from academic literature, government documents, reports of international organizations, and media publications. The study investigated how fragile institutions have shaped the country's democratic trajectory, emphasizing the role of the legislature in ensuring stability and good governance. One key finding reveals that institutional weakness, especially within the legislature, judiciary, and electoral bodies, has significantly undermined Nigeria's democratic stability. Corruption, executive interference, and weak accountability have fostered electoral malpractice, eroded public trust, and hindered democratic consolidation. Based on this, the study recommends strengthening the independence and effectiveness of core institutions such as the judiciary, INEC, and the National Assembly through constitutional reforms, adequate funding, and transparency measures. It concludes that unless Nigeria builds resilient institutions capable of resisting manipulation and enforcing accountability, the prospects of democratic stability will remain fragile. Strengthening the National Assembly as a credible guardian of governance is central to safeguarding democracy and promoting stability in the country.

KEYWORDS: *institutional Weakness, Democracy, National Assembly, Nigeria, Governance*

INTRODUCTION

Democracy in Nigeria has evolved through a turbulent trajectory characterized by alternating cycles of civilian and military regimes, flawed electoral processes, weak institutions, and struggles for good governance. Since the country's return to civilian rule in 1999, the Fourth Republic has been described as the longest democratic experience in Nigerian history. Yet, it remains fraught with challenges that have threatened its stability and growth. Central to these challenges is the question of institutional weakness, which has significantly affected the quality of governance and the stability of democratic practice. Weak institutions in Nigeria manifest through poor implementation of laws, compromised independence of the judiciary, weak electoral bodies, pervasive corruption, and the inability of state institutions to operate autonomously from elite manipulation. Akinola (2021) argue that the fragility of Nigerian institutions creates loopholes for political elites to dominate democratic processes, thereby undermining checks and balances that should stabilize the system. This condition has left Nigerian democracy vulnerable to instability, as institutional inefficiency weakens accountability, erodes public trust, and hinders the deepening of democratic culture.

The promise of democracy is often measured by its capacity to deliver good governance, including transparency, accountability, the rule of law, and improved socioeconomic outcomes for citizens. In Nigeria, however, the practice of democracy has not significantly translated into these ideals. While democratic rule has opened up spaces for participation and representation, corruption, mismanagement of resources, and lack of responsiveness to citizens' needs have limited its ability to

promote good governance (Omilusi, 2022, Ikenga & Chima, 2021). Nigerian democracy has struggled to meet the expectations of citizens who hoped that civilian rule would usher in development and social justice. Instead, poverty, unemployment, and insecurity have worsened under successive democratic administrations, raising concerns about whether democracy in Nigeria has truly promoted governance that reflects the will and welfare of the people. The inability of elected leaders to prioritize public interest over personal or party gains has entrenched a governance crisis that undermines the democratic process itself (Adeleke, 2020, Agah & Ikenga, 2019).

Moreover, the persistent problems confronting Nigerian democracy have hindered democratic consolidation. According to Linz and Stephan's theory of democratic consolidation, a democracy becomes consolidated when it is deeply embedded in society, with institutions and actors committed to democratic norms. In Nigeria, however, issues such as electoral malpractice, vote buying, weak internal party democracy, ethnic and religious polarization, and political violence have obstructed this consolidation. Scholars such as Omodia (2023) observe that the repeated cycle of contentious elections, judicial interventions in electoral disputes, and declining voter turnout point to a fragile democracy that is yet to consolidate. Democratic consolidation requires citizens' trust in institutions, but the reality of institutional weakness and governance failure has made many Nigerians sceptical about the capacity of democracy to deliver substantive benefits. This scepticism creates apathy, which further weakens democratic stability.

The National Assembly stands out as a vital institution expected to play a central role in stabilizing democracy in Nigeria. As the legislature, it holds the mandate of law-making, oversight of the executive, and representation of the people. The strength of any democracy is often measured by the effectiveness of its legislature, as it provides the checks and balances necessary to prevent authoritarian tendencies. In Nigeria, however, the National Assembly has had a mixed record. On the one hand, it has played a significant role in sustaining the democratic process since 1999, especially by resisting executive overreach and contributing to electoral reforms. On the other hand, it has been criticized for partisanship, corruption, and prioritizing personal benefits over national interest (Ojo, 2021, Ejumudo & Ikenga, 2021). The legislature's inability to consistently assert its independence has sometimes weakened its role as a stabilizing force. Yet, despite these shortcomings, the National Assembly remains central to Nigeria's democratic journey, as its vibrancy or weakness directly affects the consolidation of democratic governance.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. To what extent had institutional weakness affected democratic stability in Nigeria?
- ii. To what extent had the national assembly contributed to democratic stability in Nigeria?

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine institutional weakness and the problem of Nigerian democracy with a focus on the National Assembly. The specific objectives of this study are:

- i. examine the extent to which institutional weakness affected democratic stability in Nigeria
- ii. evaluate the extent to which the national assembly contributed to democratic stability in Nigeria

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Democracy

Democracy, as a political concept, has been extensively defined and interpreted by various scholars across different periods and perspectives. According to Diamond (2021), democracy is a system of governance where political power is vested in the people and exercised directly or through elected representatives under conditions of political equality. Linz and Stepan (1996) emphasize that democracy encompasses not just elections but the broader framework of civil liberties, rule of law, and institutional checks and balances. For Schumpeter (1942), democracy is best understood as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions by making the people themselves decide

issues through the competition of elected leaders. In contrast, Dahl (1998) conceptualizes democracy as polyarchy, marked by high levels of political participation and contestation.

Ake (2000) views democracy within the African context as a system that must adapt to local socio-political realities while retaining core principles such as accountability, participation, and representation. Hyden (2006) contends that democracy is meaningful when it is accompanied by responsiveness from leaders and adherence to public interest. O'Donnell (1994) adds that democratic governance must reflect horizontal accountability among institutions, not just vertical accountability between leaders and citizens. Fukuyama (2014) argues that democracy is deeply tied to the presence of strong state institutions and the rule of law. Freedom House (2022) defines democracy through the lens of political rights and civil liberties, emphasizing the importance of freedom of expression, association, and a fair electoral process. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) focus on democratic norms, warning that erosion of unwritten rules and mutual toleration can lead to democratic backsliding. According to Adebani (2020), democracy in Nigeria must be contextualized as a system facing elite capture and weakened institutions, despite the presence of regular elections.

Institutional Weakness

Institutional weakness refers to the persistent inability of formal structures and mechanisms, such as the legislature, judiciary, and executive, to perform their roles effectively within a democratic setting, resulting in governance breakdown, weakened accountability, and erosion of public trust. According to Uzochukwu (2020), institutional weakness in Nigeria is primarily rooted in systemic corruption, weak legal enforcement, and political interference. Omeje and Kwaja (2022) argue that the weakness of Nigerian institutions is tied to their historical evolution under colonial authoritarianism and postcolonial elite capture, which undermines meritocracy and responsiveness. Similarly, Akinrinade (2021) notes that institutions in fragile democracies often lack the autonomy and capacity to resist undue political pressure, thereby compromising their integrity. Okoye (2023) emphasizes that when institutions become overly dependent on political leaders or parties, they lose their legitimacy and ability to provide checks and balances.

According to Akume and Yusuf (2020), institutional failures are manifested in poor public service delivery, human rights violations, and lack of transparency, which collectively fuel public disillusionment with the democratic process. Adeleke (2022) contends that institutional breakdown results in the personalization of power, where rules are subordinated to individual whims. Musa and Danjuma (2021) observe that Nigeria's legislative and judicial arms have often failed to hold the executive accountable due to systemic patronage and lack of independence. In their analysis, Bello and Usman (2020) identify bureaucratic inefficiency and politicization of oversight mechanisms as critical drivers of institutional ineffectiveness. Eze and Adebayo (2021) highlight the role of underfunded and undertrained public institutions in perpetuating governance failure. Ogunyemi (2023) maintains that democratic sustainability requires robust institutions that can withstand elite manipulation and enforce the rule of law impartially. Similarly, Nnadozie (2022) points to the absence of civic engagement and public participation as contributing to institutional decay.

The National Assembly

The National Assembly of Nigeria refers to the legislative body elected, comprising the Senate and the House of Representatives, with a mandate to enact laws, provide oversight, and represent the Nigerian populace. Scholars have highlighted its significance in Nigeria's democratic evolution, noting its potential to impact governance and national development. According to Eze et al. (2023), the National Assembly is considered a critical player in strengthening Nigeria's democracy, especially following recent political shifts. The assembly's role in addressing issues such as electoral reforms, budgetary oversight, and national security has been the focus of political analysts (Sani & Ahmed, 2023, Ikenga, 2018). . Okon & Ibeh (2023) observe that the current National Assembly is facing the challenge of balancing party politics with the need for effective governance, emphasizing that party alignment influences legislative performance. Oyediran et al. (2022) argue that the

leadership dynamics within the assembly, particularly the competition between the executive and legislative branches, play a crucial role in shaping legislative outcomes.

Bello & Ojo (2023) discuss how the National Assembly reflects the shifting political landscape in Nigeria, with greater representation from younger politicians and regional diversity. The legislative body's performance, however, remains contentious, with critics questioning its commitment to reform, despite promises of transparency and accountability (Adeniran & Salau, 2023, Ikenga, 2017). Therefore, the National Assembly's role is pivotal to Nigeria's democratic consolidation, as it navigates institutional challenges and political conflicts to fulfill its legislative duties and responsibilities (Ekanem & Obasi, 2023). Its impact on shaping national policies will be a defining feature of Nigeria's political future in the years to come (Ikenga, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

The Elite theory was adopted in this study as the theoretical framework of analysis. The Elite theory is a significant framework in political science that explores how power is concentrated within a small, influential group of elites in society, even in systems that claim to be democratic. This theory challenges the notion of political equality, asserting that, despite the appearance of popular participation, true political and economic control rests with a selected groups. The foundation of elite theory was laid in the early 20th century by several scholars, including Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels, whose contributions shaped the framework with distinct ideas about the role of elites in political and social systems.

Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian sociologist, introduced key concepts in his work *The Mind and Society* (1916) that laid the groundwork for elite theory. Pareto's central argument was that all societies are governed by a minority elite, regardless of whether those societies are autocratic or democratic. He asserted that elites would always maintain control, even as individual elites might come and go. This is what he called the circulation of elites (Pareto, 1916). He proposed that while elites may change over time, the hierarchical structure of society ensures that power remains in the hands of a small group, which continues to govern despite leadership changes. According to Pareto, elites control the decision-making process, maintaining the societal order through their organizational capacities and resources.

Gaetano Mosca, another key figure in the development of elite theory, further expanded this notion in his 1896 work *The Ruling Class*. Mosca argued that every society is divided into two groups: a minority ruling class (the elites) and a majority that is largely subordinated. He contended that this division is universal, and the ruling class dominates political and economic systems due to their superior organizational capacity (Mosca, 1896). For Mosca, the majority, or "the masses," are often unaware of their subordination, which allows elites to maintain control without facing significant resistance. The idea that the minority ruling class will always dominate, regardless of the form of government, is central to Mosca's understanding of societal dynamics. Mosca's work laid the foundation for understanding how elites control political systems by managing resources and manipulating ideologies to maintain their rule.

Robert Michels is perhaps best known for his concept of the Iron Law of Oligarchy, which he introduced in his seminal work *Political Parties* (1911). Michels argued that all organizations, no matter how democratic they may appear, inevitably develop oligarchic structures. This was especially evident in political parties, which, despite being founded on democratic ideals, tend to consolidate power in the hands of a few leaders. According to Michels (1911), the Iron Law of Oligarchy states that as political organizations grow in size and complexity, decision-making authority becomes increasingly concentrated in a few hands, rendering democratic processes ineffective. He asserted that the hierarchical structure required for effective functioning in large organizations inevitably leads to the centralization of power, which becomes self-perpetuating. Michels' work significantly advanced elite theory by demonstrating that even political parties, designed to represent the people, ultimately concentrate power in the hands of a small leadership group.

Another key assumption of elite theory is that the dominance of elites is stable over time. The composition of elites may change, but the structure of power remains unchanged. Pareto (1916) suggested that elites maintain control even as individuals or groups rise and fall from power. The theory maintains that elites not only control political and economic resources but also craft ideologies and systems that justify their dominance, ensuring their position at the top of the societal hierarchy. The use of political parties, interest groups, and media controlled by elites allows them to maintain their dominance by crafting narratives that portray their rule as legitimate (Mosca, 1896).

Elite theory also posits that elites maintain control through the illusion of democracy. Despite the appearance of democratic institutions, such as elections, where citizens are ostensibly empowered to choose their leaders, elites remain the true holders of power. This idea challenges the belief in popular sovereignty and suggests that democratic institutions are often used by elites to legitimize their rule and perpetuate their dominance. In this view, political participation by the masses, while visible, is largely superficial, and the real decision-making process lies within the hands of the few. This illusion of participation helps to sustain the social order and prevents the masses from challenging elite dominance.

Modern critiques of elite theory, such as those by Robert Dahl (1961), argue that power in political systems is not as centralized as elite theory suggests. Dahl, in his theory of polyarchy, contended that power is more widely distributed in democratic systems than elite theory acknowledges. According to Dahl (1961), even in democracies, there is room for diverse interest groups and political actors to compete for influence. This view challenges the deterministic and static nature of elite theory, which emphasizes a permanent concentration of power. However, despite such criticisms, elite theory remains a critical lens through which to understand the limitations of democratic participation, particularly in systems where power is purportedly distributed but remains in the hands of a small group of elites. Elite theory, despite its foundational significance in political science, is not without its strengths and weaknesses. The theory offers valuable insights into the functioning of power structures, particularly in modern democracies, but it also faces criticisms regarding its applicability, assumptions, and limitations. Understanding these strengths and weaknesses is crucial for evaluating its relevance in contemporary political analysis.

Elite theory posits that power is concentrated in the hands of a small, organized group of elites who wield disproportionate control over political decisions. In the 10th National Assembly of Nigeria, the elites are not limited to the members of the legislature alone but also include key political figures, party leaders, and business magnates who influence policy outcomes behind the scenes. These elites can exert their control over the legislative process, making it difficult for ordinary citizens or grassroots movements to effect significant change. Mills (1956) argued that such elites have the resources, networks, and institutional backing necessary to maintain their dominance within political systems. For example, the 10th National Assembly is composed of individuals who hold significant sway in their political parties, and many of them have ties to powerful economic and political elites outside the legislature. These connections often shape the legislative agenda and ensure that policies reflect the interests of the elite, rather than the needs of the general population.

The dysfunctionality observed within the National Assembly, characterized by inefficiency, corruption, and lack of transparency, can be attributed to the inability of the legislature to serve as an independent check on the executive branch. Piven and Cloward (1977) argued that when political elites are able to control key institutions, such as the National Assembly, it becomes more difficult for democratic governance to function effectively. Elite manipulation of legislative processes can lead to gridlocks, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability, further entrenching elite dominance and preventing the legislature from fulfilling its role in holding the executive accountable.

A critical element of elite theory is the ability of elites to influence political outcomes by controlling key institutions and mechanisms of power. In the case of the 10th National Assembly, elite groups have been able to exert considerable influence over legislative independence. Members of the National Assembly, particularly those in leadership positions, often owe their rise to power to the support of influential elites, whether in their political parties or through personal connections to

external elite networks. Dahl (1961) suggested that elites, by controlling access to key political offices, can determine the agenda of the National Assembly, effectively limiting the ability of legislators to act independently in the interest of the public. For instance, party loyalty and allegiance to elite political figures often take precedence over legislative independence, leading to situations where legislators support policies that benefit the elite rather than their constituents. The National Assembly, therefore, often finds itself compromised by the influence of political elites, who ensure that the legislature remains subservient to the interests of a few. This lack of legislative independence compromises the effectiveness of the National Assembly in fulfilling its oversight function, especially regarding the executive branch.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a descriptive research design to analyze institutional weaknesses in Nigeria's democracy within its natural setting, as it enables an accurate examination of political phenomena without manipulating variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design is appropriate for assessing the National Assembly's legislative, oversight, and representative roles, as well as weaknesses such as corruption, executive interference, and poor accountability (Bhattacharjee, 2020; Bryman, 2021). Being qualitative in nature, the study relied on secondary data sourced from academic publications, government documents, legislative records, reports from international organizations, and credible media outlets. Secondary sources provided historical and contemporary perspectives crucial for contextualizing democratic challenges, while also ensuring cost-effectiveness, time efficiency, and reliance on verifiable evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018). Data collection was carried out through document analysis, which systematically reviewed and interpreted legislative proceedings, official reports, and scholarly works to identify patterns and themes embedded in Nigeria's democratic experience (Bowen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For data analysis, the study employed descriptive and content analysis to interpret and organize textual data, highlighting recurring issues such as weak oversight, corruption, and executive dominance, while ensuring findings remained aligned with the research objectives (Babbie, 2020; Flick, 2018). This methodological approach enhanced clarity, validity, and coherence in understanding how institutional weaknesses shape democratic governance in Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Institutional Weakness and the Problem of the Nigerian Democracy in the Fourth Republic

Institutional failure has remained a significant impediment to the growth and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Since 1999, Nigeria has operated under a democratic framework with institutions such as the National Assembly, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the judiciary, and various security agencies expected to uphold the rule of law, foster transparency, and promote public accountability. However, the performance of these institutions has often fallen short due to political interference, lack of autonomy, corruption, and weak institutional frameworks. According to Akinola (2022), the inability of democratic institutions to function independently and effectively has contributed to recurring electoral malpractices, political violence, and executive overreach, all of which undermine democratic principles.

The Nigerian Fourth Republic has been characterized by repeated instances where the rule of law is undermined by powerful political elites, often with the complicity of institutions that are supposed to serve as checks and balances. For instance, the judiciary, which is expected to be the last hope of the common man, is frequently manipulated through delayed justice, political appointments, and corruption. This erosion of judicial independence undermines public trust and deepens citizens' disillusionment with democratic governance. Ogundiya (2010) argued that democracy cannot thrive where the judiciary is unable to function as an impartial arbiter of justice, and this is precisely the challenge Nigeria faces. Similarly, INEC has often struggled to maintain its credibility due to logistical inefficiencies, allegations of bias, and manipulation by the ruling elite.

Despite efforts to improve electoral processes, such as the introduction of technologies like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), the institution is still perceived by many as susceptible to elite capture. In the 2023 general elections, for example, several observers reported delays in result transmission, raising concerns about the transparency of the process (Ibrahim & Nwagwu, 2023). The failure of INEC to maintain consistent operational standards contributes to voter apathy and cynicism toward elections as a credible means of political participation.

The legislature, which is expected to represent the interests of the people, has also come under scrutiny for being more responsive to executive patronage than to the electorate. Many legislators prioritize personal or party interests over national interest, resulting in weak oversight functions and rubber-stamp behavior. This institutional docility has enabled successive administrations to act with impunity, often at the expense of democratic norms. According to Ezeani (2021), the co-optation of the legislature into the executive orbit compromises the system of separation of powers, which is central to democratic sustainability. Moreover, the Nigerian police and other security agencies, which should enforce the law impartially, are frequently used as tools of political intimidation and repression. Protest movements such as #EndSARS have revealed the extent to which security institutions can become agents of human rights violations rather than protectors of democratic freedom. Akinsanya and Obasi (2024) contend that security agencies' complicity in electoral fraud and political harassment reveals deep institutional decay and contributes to citizens' withdrawal from political engagement.

Table 1: Institutional Weakness and the Problem of Nigerian Democracy (First Republic – Present Fourth Republic)

Republic/Period	Institutional Weakness	Implications for Nigerian Democracy
First Republic (1960–1966)	Weak constitutional framework, ethnoregional divisions, political intolerance, and manipulation of electoral bodies.	Breakdown of the democratic order, military coup of 1966, and erosion of trust in civil institutions.
Second Republic (1979–1983)	Weak party system, corruption, executive dominance, electoral malpractice (e.g., 1983 elections).	Collapse of the Republic, return of military rule, delegitimization of electoral institutions.
Third Republic (1992–1993)	Manipulation of the democratic transition by the military, lack of autonomy of electoral bodies, and annulment of June 12 election.	Short-lived Republic, aborted democratic experiment, and distrust in democratic processes.
Fourth Republic (1999–2007)	The National Assembly lacked independence, weak oversight on the executive, electoral fraud (2003 and 2007 elections), and corruption in legislative processes.	Undermining of checks and balances, weakening of democratic consolidation, and widespread public disillusionment.
Fourth Republic (2007–2015)	Continued institutional corruption, weak internal democracy in political parties, legislative-executive conflicts, and a lack of transparency in resource allocation.	Democratic backsliding, heightened political violence, and challenges in governance and accountability.
Fourth Republic (2015–2023)	Politicization of anti-corruption institutions, weakening of electoral institutions despite reforms, and institutional capture by ruling elites.	Reduced democratic credibility, persistent voter apathy, and insecurity affecting democratic participation.
Fourth Republic (2023–Present)	Electoral disputes, despite the introduction, weak enforcement of constitutional roles by the National Assembly and institutional	Democracy remains fragile, institutions lack autonomy, and democratic stability continues to

Republic/Period	Institutional Weakness	Implications for Nigerian Democracy
	fragility in addressing insecurity and corruption.	face challenges.

Table 1 presents a historical overview of institutional weaknesses and their implications for the Nigerian democratic experience, spanning from the First Republic to the present Fourth Republic. The data clearly illustrate a recurring pattern of institutional fragility and its direct consequences on democratic stability, legitimacy, and consolidation in Nigeria.

During the First Republic (1960–1966), the combination of a weak constitutional framework, ethnoregional divisions, political intolerance, and manipulation of electoral bodies contributed to the breakdown of democratic governance. These institutional deficiencies created an environment in which political disputes escalated into conflict, culminating in the military coup of 1966. The absence of robust institutions capable of managing diversity, mediating conflicts, and enforcing electoral integrity undermined trust in democratic processes and civil institutions, setting a precedent for subsequent political instability.

In the Second Republic (1979–1983), institutional weaknesses persisted, particularly through a weak party system, executive dominance, corruption, and widespread electoral malpractice, as exemplified by the disputed 1983 elections. These factors led to the collapse of the Republic and a return to military rule, further eroding public confidence in democratic institutions. The period demonstrates that even with formal democratic structures in place, the absence of effective institutional checks and enforcement mechanisms renders democracy highly vulnerable to manipulation and executive overreach.

The Third Republic (1992–1993) highlights the continued fragility of democratic institutions in the face of military interference. The manipulation of the democratic transition, the lack of autonomy for electoral bodies, and the annulment of the June 12 election collectively resulted in the failure of the democratic experiment. The short-lived nature of this Republic and the abrupt cessation of democratic governance reinforced public skepticism toward the legitimacy and durability of democratic processes in Nigeria.

The Fourth Republic, spanning from 1999 to the present, exhibits both continuity and evolution in institutional challenges. In the early phase (1999–2007), the National Assembly's lack of independence, weak oversight of the executive, electoral fraud, and corruption in legislative processes undermined democratic consolidation. Although democratic structures were formally established, the legislature's inability to effectively check the executive weakened accountability and contributed to widespread public disillusionment.

From 2007 to 2015, the entrenchment of institutional corruption, weak internal democracy in political parties, legislative-executive conflicts, and a lack of transparency in resource allocation led to democratic backsliding. This period was marked by heightened political violence and governance challenges, illustrating that systemic institutional weaknesses continued to erode the credibility and effectiveness of democratic governance despite a longer period of civilian rule.

Between 2015 and 2023, the politicization of anti-corruption institutions, continued weakening of electoral bodies despite reforms, and institutional capture by ruling elites further compromised democratic credibility. Persistent voter apathy, rising insecurity, and limited enforcement of accountability mechanisms reflected the enduring impact of structural weaknesses on citizen participation and trust in democratic processes.

In the current phase of the Fourth Republic (2023–Present), electoral disputes, weak enforcement of constitutional roles by the National Assembly, and institutional fragility in addressing insecurity and corruption indicate that Nigerian democracy remains fragile. Despite reforms and institutional innovations, the inability of democratic institutions to operate independently and effectively continues to challenge democratic stability, legitimacy, and consolidation.

Table 2: Descriptive Summary of the Nigerian National Assembly (1960 – Present)

National Assembly	Period	Characteristics and Contributions
First National Assembly	1960 – 1966	Modeled after the Westminster system, dominated by regional politics (NCNC in East, NPC in North, AG in West); marked by ethnic rivalry and weak national cohesion, collapsed after the first military coup in 1966.
Second National Assembly	1979 – 1983	Adopted U.S.-style presidential system; vibrant debates, but plagued by corruption, executive-legislative conflicts, and electoral malpractices; terminated by the military coup of December 1983.
Third National Assembly	1992 – 1993	Part of Gen. Babangida’s transition programme; short-lived due to annulment of June 12, 1993 election; lacked stability and legitimacy.
Fourth National Assembly	1999 – 2003	Inaugurated at the return of democracy under President Olusegun Obasanjo; marked by frequent leadership tussles (five Senate Presidents in four years); began asserting independence but largely influenced by executive interference.
Fifth National Assembly	2003 – 2007	Consolidated legislative practices; passed key anti-corruption and electoral reform laws; still marred by executive dominance and internal crises.
Sixth National Assembly	2007 – 2011	Gained more legislative independence; investigated executive corruption (e.g., power sector probe); strengthened checks and balances; improved public perception of legislative oversight.
Seventh National Assembly	2011 – 2015	Notable for relative stability in leadership; passed key bills (e.g., Freedom of Information Act, Pension Reform Act); tensions with Jonathan’s administration but enhanced legislative assertiveness.
Eighth National Assembly	2015 – 2019	Marked by strong opposition to executive dominance; Senate President Bukola Saraki defied party hierarchy; robust debates, increased transparency, but also accusations of self-serving politics.
Ninth National Assembly	2019 – 2023	Characterized by close alignment with executive under Buhari, earning the label “rubber stamp” by critics; prioritized executive bills; reduced legislative independence.
Tenth National Assembly	2023 – Present	Inaugurated under President Bola Tinubu; faces challenges of economic reforms, insecurity, and

National Assembly	Period	Characteristics and Contributions
		public distrust; tasked with rebuilding legislative credibility. Early signs show continued executive-legislative cooperation but concerns over independence remain.

Table 2: provides a historical overview of the Nigerian National Assembly, tracing its evolution from the First Republic through to the present Tenth Assembly. The data reveal a persistent pattern in which broader political contexts, institutional weaknesses, executive-legislative relations, and leadership dynamics have closely influenced the effectiveness and stability of the legislature.

The First National Assembly (1960–1966), modeled after the Westminster parliamentary system, was dominated by regional politics and marked by ethnic rivalries. The dominance of parties along regional lines, such as the NCNC in the East, NPC in the North, and AG in the West, contributed to weak national cohesion and limited legislative effectiveness. The assembly's inability to manage political differences and maintain national unity ultimately coincided with its collapse following the military coup of 1966, highlighting the fragility of early democratic institutions in Nigeria.

The Second National Assembly (1979–1983), operating under a U.S.-style presidential system, introduced a more structured legislative framework with vibrant debates. However, it faced significant challenges, including corruption, executive-legislative conflicts, and electoral malpractices. These weaknesses contributed to governance instability and culminated in the military coup of December 1983, demonstrating that legislative assertiveness alone could not stabilize democracy without broader institutional support and adherence to democratic norms.

The Third National Assembly (1992–1993) emerged as part of General Babangida's transition program but was short-lived due to the annulment of the June 12 election. Its brief existence reflected both the volatility of Nigeria's political transitions under military regimes and the difficulties in establishing legislative legitimacy when electoral and institutional foundations were compromised.

The Fourth National Assembly (1999–2003), inaugurated with the return to democracy under President Olusegun Obasanjo, began asserting legislative independence despite frequent leadership tussles, including the unprecedented occurrence of five Senate Presidents within four years. Although the Assembly attempted to assert its role, it was largely influenced by executive interference, reflecting a broader pattern of executive dominance that constrained legislative effectiveness in the early years of the Fourth Republic.

The Fifth National Assembly (2003–2007) saw a consolidation of legislative practices, with notable achievements in passing anti-corruption and electoral reform laws. Nevertheless, the Assembly continued to face challenges from executive dominance and internal crises, illustrating that formal legislative authority was insufficient to fully check executive power in the absence of strong institutional support and political cohesion.

The Sixth National Assembly (2007–2011) marked a period of enhanced legislative independence. By investigating executive corruption, such as probes into the power sector, and strengthening checks and balances, the legislature improved public perception of its oversight function. This period demonstrates that assertive legislative practices can enhance democratic accountability when accompanied by institutional capacity and public engagement.

The Seventh National Assembly (2011–2015) maintained relative stability in leadership and achieved significant legislative accomplishments, including the passage of the Freedom of Information Act and the Pension Reform Act. Despite tensions with President Jonathan's administration, the Assembly's assertiveness indicated a maturing legislature capable of enhancing governance and institutional oversight, reinforcing the role of the legislature in consolidating democracy.

The Eighth National Assembly (2015–2019) exhibited strong opposition to executive dominance, with Senate President Bukola Saraki defying party hierarchy and promoting robust

debates and increased transparency. However, accusations of self-serving politics reflected ongoing challenges in balancing legislative independence with ethical accountability, demonstrating the complex interplay between power, governance, and institutional credibility.

The Ninth National Assembly (2019–2023) was characterized by close alignment with the executive under President Buhari, which led critics to label it a “rubber stamp” legislature. By prioritizing executive bills, the Assembly exhibited reduced independence, highlighting that legislative effectiveness is contingent not only on institutional structures but also on political dynamics, party loyalty, and leadership orientation.

The Tenth National Assembly (2023–Present), inaugurated under President Bola Tinubu, faces significant challenges, including managing economic reforms, insecurity, and public distrust. Early signs suggest continued executive-legislative cooperation, but concerns over independence remain. This reflects the enduring tension between legislative oversight and executive influence in Nigeria’s political system and underscores the need for reforms that strengthen institutional autonomy, enhance transparency, and rebuild public confidence in the National Assembly.

Table 3: Descriptive Summary of the Nigerian National Assembly and its problems to Nigerian Democracy (1960 – Present)

National Assembly (Republic/Session)	Characteristics	How these posed Problems to Nigerian Democracy
First National Assembly (First Republic, 1960–1966)	Parliamentary system under the 1960/1963 Constitution; weak institutional independence; dominance of regional politics; frequent executive interference.	Regionalism and ethnic rivalry undermined national unity, while weak institutional checks allowed executive dominance, leading to instability and eventual military intervention.
Second National Assembly (Second Republic, 1979–1983)	Operated under the 1979 Constitution (Presidential system); modeled after U.S. Congress; greater separation of powers; however, plagued by corruption, inefficiency, and weak oversight.	Rampant corruption and executive–legislative friction weakened democratic consolidation, creating public disillusionment and paving the way for another military coup in 1983.
Third National Assembly (Aborted Third Republic, 1992–1993)	Short-lived experiment under General Babangida’s transition; partially functional legislature; heavily controlled by the military.	Limited autonomy and lack of legitimacy eroded citizens’ confidence in democracy; annulment of June 12, 1993 elections destroyed legislative credibility.
Fourth National Assembly (Fourth Republic, 1999–2003)	Inaugurated under the 1999 Constitution; bicameral legislature (Senate and House of Reps); plagued by frequent leadership tussles, floor-crossing, and weak legislative discipline.	Leadership crises and executive dominance weakened institutional stability, undermining checks and balances and stalling early democratic consolidation.
Fifth & Sixth National Assemblies (2003–2011)	Growing assertiveness; notable impeachment threats to executive officials; introduction of public hearings; corruption scandals became widespread (e.g., power probe, bribe-for-budget).	Corruption and self-serving interests overshadowed legislative functions, eroding citizens’ trust in democratic institutions and weakening accountability.
Seventh National	Improved independence; legislative	Legislative–executive conflicts

National Assembly (Republic/Session)	Characteristics	How these posed Problems to Nigerian Democracy
Assembly (2011–2015)	activism; notable constitutional amendments; however, partisan politics intensified and lawmakers were accused of prioritizing personal gains.	(especially under Jonathan) stalled governance, while excessive focus on allowances and constituency projects damaged public trust in democracy.
Eighth National Assembly (2015–2019)	Marked by strong resistance to executive dominance under President Buhari; leadership crisis between party and legislature; delayed budgets and bills.	Persistent gridlocks weakened governance effectiveness; excessive political brinkmanship portrayed democracy as inefficient and unstable.
Ninth National Assembly (2019–2023)	Seen as “rubber-stamp” to executive; high rate of loan approvals; reduced independence; limited checks on presidential power.	Excessive compliance with executive weakened democratic accountability and fostered authoritarian tendencies, reducing citizens’ confidence in legislative oversight.
Tenth National Assembly (2023–Present)	Still evolving under Tinubu’s administration; characterized by early dominance of ruling party; attempts at constitutional reforms, and allegations of patronage politics.	Early signs of executive loyalty risk reducing legislative independence, potentially continuing the trend of weak checks and balances that hinder democratic deepening.

Table 3 provides a historical and analytical overview of the Nigerian National Assembly from the First Republic through the present Tenth Assembly, with a focus on the characteristics of each legislative session and the challenges these posed to democratic development in Nigeria. The data reveal a persistent pattern in which the legislature’s effectiveness and independence have been constrained by systemic, institutional, and political factors, thereby impacting the consolidation and stability of democracy.

The First National Assembly (1960–1966) operated under a parliamentary system, with weak institutional independence and heavy dominance of regional politics. Frequent executive interference and ethnoregional rivalries undermined national cohesion, and the lack of robust institutional checks allowed executive overreach. These factors collectively weakened the legislative capacity to sustain democracy and contributed to political instability, culminating in the military coup of 1966. This early period illustrates how ethnic polarization and structural institutional weaknesses can compromise the legislature’s role as a stabilizing force in democracy.

During the Second National Assembly (1979–1983), operating under a U.S.-style presidential system, the legislature theoretically had greater separation of powers. However, rampant corruption, inefficiency, and weak oversight persisted, resulting in executive-legislative conflicts that eroded public trust in governance. The inability of the legislature to effectively check executive power, combined with systemic corruption, contributed to public disillusionment and paved the way for the military coup of 1983, highlighting that formal separation of powers is insufficient without functional institutional capacity.

The Third National Assembly (1992–1993), part of General Babangida’s transition program, was short-lived and heavily controlled by the military. Limited autonomy and lack of legitimacy undermined citizens’ confidence in democratic processes, and the annulment of the June 12 election further destroyed legislative credibility. This period emphasizes how external interference and constrained legislative independence can negate democratic efforts, even when formal structures are in place.

The Fourth National Assembly (1999–2003), inaugurated under the 1999 Constitution, faced challenges including frequent leadership tussles, floor-crossing, and weak legislative discipline. Executive dominance during this period undermined checks and balances, stalling early democratic consolidation and weakening institutional stability. Although the Assembly attempted to assert itself, internal divisions and political interference limited its capacity to strengthen democracy.

Between 2003 and 2011, encompassing the Fifth and Sixth National Assemblies, legislative assertiveness increased, exemplified by impeachment threats and the introduction of public hearings. Nonetheless, corruption scandals, including bribery in budgetary processes and investigations such as the power sector probe, overshadowed legislative functions. These self-serving practices eroded citizens' trust in democratic institutions and reduced the Assembly's effectiveness in ensuring accountability, demonstrating that legislative activism must be coupled with ethical integrity to strengthen democracy.

The Seventh National Assembly (2011–2015) exhibited improved independence and legislative activism, including notable constitutional amendments. However, intensified partisan politics and accusations of prioritizing personal gains reflected ongoing challenges. Legislative-executive conflicts, particularly under the Jonathan administration, sometimes stalled governance, while excessive focus on personal allowances and constituency projects damaged public confidence in the legislature's role as a guardian of democratic accountability.

The Eighth National Assembly (2015–2019) resisted executive dominance under President Buhari, but leadership crises between the party and legislature, along with delayed budgets and bills, created governance gridlocks. While this period highlighted legislative assertiveness, the excessive political brinkmanship portrayed democracy as inefficient and unstable, demonstrating the delicate balance between independence and collaborative governance.

The Ninth National Assembly (2019–2023) was characterized by close alignment with the executive, earning the label "rubber-stamp" legislature. Its reduced independence and limited checks on presidential power weakened democratic accountability and fostered authoritarian tendencies, undermining public confidence in legislative oversight. This period illustrates that compliance with executive authority, while politically expedient, can compromise the legislature's constitutional role in safeguarding democracy.

The Tenth National Assembly (2023–Present) is still evolving under the Tinubu administration. Early indications show dominance by the ruling party and attempts at constitutional reforms, but allegations of patronage politics and executive loyalty risk reducing legislative independence. If unchecked, these trends may continue the historical pattern of weak checks and balances, potentially hindering democratic deepening and the legislature's capacity to function as an effective pillar of democratic governance.

Qualitative Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question1: To what extent had institutional weakness affected democratic stability in Nigeria?

Institutional weakness has profoundly undermined democratic stability in Nigeria, as fragile political institutions continue to struggle with issues of corruption, poor accountability, weak rule of law, and executive dominance. The effectiveness of democratic systems depends largely on the strength of their institutions, which ensure checks and balances, adherence to constitutionalism, and respect for electoral processes. However, in Nigeria, weak institutions have enabled recurrent electoral malpractice, compromised judicial independence, and limited the legislature's oversight capacity, thereby eroding citizens' confidence in democracy. According to Adebajo (2021), institutional fragility has entrenched a culture of impunity where political elites manipulate legal and constitutional frameworks to perpetuate personal and party interests, rather than advancing democratic consolidation. Similarly, Oloruntoba (2022) argues that the prevalence of corruption within public institutions has not only deepened governance crises but also created avenues for electoral violence and authoritarian tendencies under the guise of democratic rule.

The weakness of anti-corruption bodies, coupled with the inability of security institutions to remain neutral during elections, has further destabilized democratic practices (Okonkwo & Adeyemi, 2023). In many cases, institutions that are expected to safeguard democracy have been co-opted by political actors, leading to the erosion of accountability and transparency. This situation resonates with Diamond (2020), who emphasizes that weak institutions in African democracies undermine trust between the state and its citizens, resulting in political apathy and social unrest. In the Nigerian context, the institutional incapacity of electoral bodies like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has fueled widespread skepticism about the credibility of elections, thereby threatening democratic legitimacy. Moreover, judiciary's weakness in enforcing constitutional provisions and resolving electoral disputes fairly has contributed to a cycle of instability and contested political transitions (Ezeani, 2021).

Research Question 2: To what extent had the National Assembly contributed to democratic stability in Nigeria?

The National Assembly, as Nigeria's central legislative institution, has played an important but uneven role in contributing to democratic stability since the advent of the Fourth Republic. On one hand, it has provided a constitutional platform for lawmaking, oversight, and representation, which are critical to democratic governance. The legislature has at various points asserted its independence by checking executive excesses, conducting investigations into corruption scandals, and providing a forum for national debate. For instance, legislative interventions in electoral reforms, budgetary oversight, and constitutional amendments have been instrumental in strengthening democratic practices (Ojo, 2021). According to Nwozor and Okolie (2022), the legislature has served as a stabilizing force by representing diverse political voices and mediating conflicts that could have escalated into broader governance crises. Through impeachment proceedings, legislative inquiries, and motions of national importance, the National Assembly has at times curtailed the authoritarian tendencies of the executive, thereby reinforcing democratic resilience.

However, the Assembly's contribution to democratic stability has been inconsistent due to pervasive corruption, internal divisions, and susceptibility to executive manipulation. Legislative capture by political elites often undermines the Assembly's ability to act as an effective check on the executive, thereby weakening its democratic role (Okeke, 2020). Similarly, Akinola (2021) contends that while the National Assembly has constitutional powers to enhance governance accountability, it has frequently failed to utilize these powers effectively, partly because of patronage politics and the dominance of ruling party interests. Nonetheless, the Assembly remains an indispensable institution for Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Its role in passing key laws such as the Electoral Act reforms of 2022 demonstrates its capacity to shape electoral credibility and democratic growth (Ibrahim, 2022).

In addition, the Assembly has contributed to stability by providing a platform for minority voices, accommodating regional demands, and maintaining the federal character of Nigerian politics (Ogunyemi, 2023).

Findings and Observations

The following findings are observed:

- i. The study reveals that institutional weakness has been a major factor undermining democratic stability in Nigeria. Key institutions such as the legislature, judiciary, and electoral bodies have failed to provide effective checks and balances, with corruption, executive dominance, and weak accountability fostering impunity, electoral malpractice, and public distrust. The inability of INEC to ensure credible elections and the judiciary's weakness in enforcing constitutional provisions have further eroded democratic legitimacy, leaving Nigeria's democracy fragile.

- ii. The study discovered that the National Assembly has played a mixed role in shaping democratic stability. Positively, it has contributed through lawmaking, oversight, electoral reforms, and providing a platform for representation and national debate. However, its impact has been weakened by corruption, political patronage, and executive influence.

CONCLUSION

This study has established that institutional weakness has undermined democratic stability in Nigeria, as fragile institutions, including the legislature, judiciary, and electoral bodies, have consistently failed to uphold accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. Corruption, executive dominance, weak oversight mechanisms, and electoral malpractice have eroded public trust, weakened democratic legitimacy, and perpetuated political instability. The inability of institutions like INEC and the judiciary to function independently has further exposed the vulnerability of Nigeria's democratic process. The study has also demonstrated that the National Assembly has played a dual role in Nigeria's democratic experience. While it has positively contributed through lawmaking, oversight functions, electoral reforms, and representation, its efforts have been inconsistent due to corruption, political patronage, and executive interference. These weaknesses have limited its capacity to safeguard democratic values. Nonetheless, as the central legislative institution, the National Assembly remains indispensable to Nigeria's democratic consolidation, and its performance directly influences the prospects for stability and governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were made:

- i. There is a need to strengthen the independence and effectiveness of key institutions such as the judiciary, INEC, and anti-corruption agencies. This can be achieved through constitutional reforms, adequate funding, operational autonomy, and enhanced transparency measures that foster accountability and public trust. Civil society engagement should also be encouraged to provide external checks on governance.
- ii. The National Assembly must be repositioned as a stronger guardian of democratic governance. This requires improving its oversight functions, curbing corruption through stricter ethical standards, and resisting executive manipulation. Legislators should undergo continuous training to improve professionalism, while reforms should focus on electoral credibility, inclusivity, and better representation of Nigeria's diverse population. By promoting transparency in its proceedings and fostering citizen participation, the National Assembly can effectively fulfill its constitutional mandate and serve as a stabilizing force in Nigeria's democracy.

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