

NIGERIA'S 2025 FOILED COUP: A LEEWAY TO RESURRECT DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA.

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Abstract

The recent foiled coup attempt in Nigeria, though publicly denounced as a treasonable offense, reveals the underlying cynicism with the country's democratic practice. This article argues that while coups are inherently anti-democratic, their recurrence in a nominally democratic system reflects a profound crisis of correctness and governance. Drawing on the political economy of Nigeria's postcolonial state, the article examines the socioeconomic and institutional factors that have gouged the substance of democracy and alienated citizens from the state. It contends that the coup's failure should not end the discussion but open a new one, one that confronts the structural distortions of Nigeria's democratic order and seeks pathways to its resurrection through institutional reform, economic justice, leadership performance and civic reawakening.

Keywords: Democracy, Coup, Political Economy, Nigeria, Legitimacy, Governance

Introduction

On May 29, 2025, Nigeria marked 26 uninterrupted years of civilian democratic governance and its longest continuous democratic spell since attaining independence from Britain on October 1, 1960. The First Republic lasted a mere six years before it was terminated by the military coup of January 15, 1966 and the Second Republic survived four years and three months before the Buhari-Idiagbon coup of December 31, 1983 while the Third Republic, whose defining electoral moment was the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election widely adjudged to have been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola, was never formally inaugurated (Diamond, 1995; Osaghae, 1998). Against this turbulent backdrop, May 29, 1999 and the 26 years that have followed represents not merely a constitutional milestone but a hard-won democratic achievement forged from the ruins of sixteen consecutive years of military autocracy during which the armed forces governed Nigeria for 29 of its then 39 years of independence (Osaghae, 1998).

Before the democratic transition of 1999, Nigeria had become, in the phrase of the historian Eghosa E. Osaghae (1998, p. 312), the site of "the greatest catalyst of Nigeria's descent into anarchy", a characterization earned through the 1993 annulment crisis, the resultant political paralysis, the imposition of international sanctions by the United States and European partners, and the collapse of productive economic activity under the combined weight of misgovernance, social unrest, and global isolation. The transition from General Sani Abacha's brutalist dictatorship through the transitional administration of General Abdulsalami Abubakar to the inauguration of General Olusegun Obasanjo as the Fourth Republic's first civilian president was, as Suberu (2001) argues, far from a consolidated democratic outcome, it was a negotiated political settlement between military factions and civilian elites. The democratic architecture erected in 1999 was,

from its foundations, structurally ambiguous and procedurally sound in the formal mechanisms of elections and constitutional government, yet substantively fragile in the economic, institutional, and civic conditions that determine whether democracy can survive.

It is within this layered historical context that the foiled coup attempt of September–October 2025 must be situated and interpreted. The arrest, by the Defence Intelligence Agency and allied security services, of at least 16 senior military officers subsequently expanded to 40 suspects including civilians implicated in financing and logistics for an alleged plot to assassinate President Bola Tinubu, Vice-President Kashim Shettima, Senate President Godswill Akpabio, and Speaker Tajudeen Abbas, and to seize control of strategic installations including the Presidential Villa and Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, cannot be treated as an aberration (Premium Times, 2025, Premium Times, 2026, PRNigeria, 2025). It is, rather, a symptomatic expression of structural pathologies that have characterised the Nigerian postcolonial state across all its political dispensations. The erosion of institutional legitimacy, the decay of state capacity, the political economy of elite exclusion, and the collapse of the social contract between rulers and the ruled (Ake, 1996; Achebe, 1983).

The continental context amplifies the significance of the Nigerian episode. Sub-Saharan Africa between 2020 and 2025 witnessed a resurgence of military interventions unprecedented in the post-Cold War democratic era, successful coups in Mali (August 2020 and May 2021), Guinea (September 2021), Burkina Faso (January and September 2022), Niger (July 2023), and Gabon (August 2023), in addition to attempted interventions in Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Benin and Gambia (Harsch, 2025, Arthur, 2025 Wikipedia, 2025). As Harsch (2025), writing in *Third World Quarterly*, demonstrates, the most recent African coups were not simply adventurist military interventions but they were, at least in part, products of popular disappointment in elected governments, governments that had failed on security, economic governance, and constitutional fidelity. The Afrobarometer surveys conducted across 39 African countries between 2021 and 2023 confirm that while 66% of citizens still prefer democracy in principle, tolerance for democratic breakdown rises dramatically where governance deficits are severe and persistent (Harsch, 2025; UNDP, 2023). Nigeria's democratic endurance in this context is both analytically significant and normatively consequential.

The problem this article interrogates lies at the intersection of three unresolved tensions. The first is the tension between democratic form and democratic substance, Nigeria has maintained the procedural architecture of multiparty democracy, regular elections, constitutional governance and civilian transfer of power while the substantive conditions of democratic accountability, institutional integrity, and social contract remain deeply compromised (O'Donnell, 1994; Diamond, 1999). The second tension concerns the interpretation of the foiled coup itself, whether Nigeria's ability to avert the 2025 coup represents genuine democratic consolidation and institutional maturity, or merely a circumstantial victory whose structural foundations remain dangerously thin (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Schedler, 2001). The third tension is comparative and continental, in a regional environment where successful coups have attracted popular legitimation rather than mass condemnation, what does Nigeria's response to its foiled coup reveal about the

differential conditions under which democratic resilience is constructed and sustained (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018)?

Despite the political significance of the 2025 foiled coup, there remains a pronounced gap in scholarly analysis. Most existing studies of African coups including Harsch's (2025) seminal *Third World Quarterly* article on the limits of African electoralism, Arthur's (2025) analysis of democratic backsliding in West Africa, and the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (2024) examination of Africa's recent coup wave focus predominantly on the causes and outcomes of successful interventions. The counter-coup dynamics, the specific institutional, civil-military, political, and international mechanisms that prevent foiled plots from becoming successful seizures of power remain under-theorised and under-examined in the African democratic governance literature. The Nigerian 2025 case offers a unique opportunity to address this gap.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The trajectory of democratic governance in Africa continues to be undermined by recurring unconstitutional changes of government, particularly the resurgence of military coups between 2020 and 2025 in countries such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon. These developments have exposed the fragility of democratic institutions across the continent and raised critical concerns about the sustainability of democratic governance in post-authoritarian African states (Samuel Decalo, 1990; Kwesi Aning, 2020). Within this context, Nigeria's 2025 foiled coup attempt emerges as a significant case, reflecting both the systemic vulnerabilities and latent resilience of one of Africa's most influential democracies.

Despite over two decades of uninterrupted civilian rule since 1999, Nigeria's democracy remains challenged by electoral irregularities, corruption, insecurity, and declining public trust in governance institutions (Richard A. Joseph, 1987; Afrobarometer, 2024). These conditions have created an environment conducive to anti-democratic sentiments, making the attempted coup not merely an isolated but a manifestation of deeper structural and political contradictions. Yet, the failure of the coup also suggests the presence of countervailing forces capable of resisting democratic breakdown.

The core problem, therefore, lies in the limited scholarly understanding of the factors that enabled Nigeria to withstand this threat. Existing literature on coups in Africa largely focuses on causation and outcomes, with insufficient attention to the internal institutional mechanisms, civic resistance, and international influences that prevent coups from succeeding. Consequently, it remains unclear whether Nigeria's experience represents a genuine process of democratic consolidation or merely a temporary interruption of underlying governance crises (Larry Diamond, 1999).

Addressing this gap is essential not only for interpreting the Nigerian case but also for drawing broader lessons on how African states can strengthen democratic resilience against military intervention.

OBJECTIVES

1. The aim of this study is to provide a rigorous scholarly analysis of Nigeria's 2025 foiled coup attempt, situating it within Africa's broader democratic governance crisis and deriving theoretically grounded insights for the strengthening of democratic institutions across the continent and to achieve these aims, the study pursues the following specific objectives;
2. To contextualise Nigeria's 2025 foiled coup within the pattern of African democratic backsliding and military interventions between 2020 and 2025
3. To analyse the structural conditions, political economy, governance failures, civil-military relations, and elite fragmentation that generated the conditions for the coup attempt
4. To examine the counter-coup mechanisms that enabled the democratic framework to survive
5. To assess whether the foiled coup represents genuine democratic consolidation or circumstantial resilience

These objectives generate four (4) research questions:

1. What structural conditions generated the 2025 coup attempt and how do they compare with conditions enabling successful African coups?
2. What specific mechanisms enabled Nigeria's democratic framework to withstand the threat?
3. Does the coup's failure constitute evidence of democratic consolidation?
4. And what lessons does the Nigerian experience offer for continental democratic governance?

The significance of this study lies in its original scholarly contributions to knowledge. Theoretically, it extends the democratic consolidation framework (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Diamond, 1999) by integrating political economy analysis particularly rentier state theory (Mahdavy, 1970; Beblawi, 1987), prebendal politics (Joseph, 1987), and resource curse dynamics (Ross, 2001) to explain how economic structures shape democratic resilience and vulnerability to coups. Empirically, it provides the first sustained academic analysis of the 2025 coup's details, drawing on verified investigative reporting from Premium Times, PRNigeria, The Africa Report, and Guardian Nigeria. Comparatively, it situates Nigeria within the pan-African coup wave, identifying structural similarities and distinctions with Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon. Normatively, it translates analytical findings into concrete institutional and governance reform recommendations for democratic consolidation in Nigeria and the broader African context.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

THE CRISIS OF CIVIL LEGITIMACY IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

The recurrent fragility of democracy in Africa, and in Nigeria in particular, cannot be fully understood without interrogating the political economy that underpins state power, governance, and institutional performance. Democratic failure is rarely the result of an outright rejection of democratic ideals; rather, it reflects the ways in which economic structures, rent-seeking behaviors, and elite interests distort democratic processes and undermine accountable governance (Claude Ake, 1996; Douglass C. North, 1990).

In Nigeria, the postcolonial state has been characterized by a rentier political economy heavily dependent on oil revenues and distributive politics rather than productive capacity and institutional efficiency (Terry Lynn Karl, 1997; Hazem Beblawi & Giacomo Luciani, 1987). This structure fosters political competition centered on access to state resources rather than policy innovation or democratic legitimacy. Consequently, elections often function as mechanisms for accessing patronage rather than genuine expressions of popular choice (Richard A. Joseph, 1987). Such dynamics erode public confidence in electoral processes and deepen political apathy, while simultaneously creating conditions in which military actors may justify intervention as corrective responses to civilian misrule (Samuel Decalo, 1990).

The economic mismanagement and inequality associated with this rentier system further exacerbate democratic vulnerability. High unemployment, corruption, and the concentration of wealth among political elites generate widespread socio-economic discontent that can translate into anti-democratic sentiments (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Transparency International, 2023). Nigeria's political economy thus operates within a paradox: democracy is formally institutionalized through constitutions, elections, and civic structures, yet substantively undermined by entrenched elite interests and the systemic exclusion of the majority from governance benefits (Larry Diamond, 1999).

Moreover, the clientelist and prebendal nature of Nigeria's political system weakens state institutionalization. Bureaucratic agencies and security institutions are frequently politicized, while accountability mechanisms are subordinated to patronage networks (Richard A. Joseph, 1987; Eghosa E. Osaghae, 1998). This dynamic creates fertile ground for governance failures and has historically provided justification for military interventions. Recurring cycles of corruption, electoral malpractice, and public-sector inefficiency are therefore not isolated administrative failures but manifestations of deeper structural contradictions within Nigeria's political economy (Guillermo O'Donnell, 1994).

At the continental level, similar patterns persist. Many African democracies remain embedded in neopatrimonial systems where elite capture, economic dependency, and weak institutional frameworks constrain democratic consolidation (Patrick Chabal & Jean-Pascal Daloz, 1999; Thandika Mkandawire, 2001). External economic pressures particularly from global financial institutions and international markets often prioritize macroeconomic stability over deep institutional reform, thereby reinforcing procedural rather than substantive democracy (International Monetary Fund, 2023). As a result, elections occur regularly, but without the socio-economic foundations necessary for meaningful participation and accountability.

The 2025 foiled coup in Nigeria, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a political or security event; it must be situated within this broader political economy that both generates and constrains democratic governance. Examining how economic interests, class dynamics, and distributive politics shape the incentives of both civilian and military actors is crucial to interpreting the significance of this episode (Edward A. Nordlinger, 1977). If the coup's failure represents a turning point, it may indicate not only institutional resilience but also the potential renegotiation of the material foundations of power in Nigeria where, gradually, the logic of patronage may give way to more accountable and sustainable democratic practices (Francis Fukuyama, 2014).

THE COUP AND ITS IRONY

Historically, coups in Nigeria have often been justified as corrective interventions against corruption or misrule, even though they frequently reproduced the same vices they sought to eliminate (Diamond, 1988). The irony of the 2025 foiled coup lies in its moral message: while the actors sought unconstitutional change, their grievances mirror those of millions of citizens disenchanted with a system that delivers neither security nor prosperity.

The irony deepens when one recognizes that democracy itself has become militarized through the suppression of protests, intimidation of journalists, and criminalization of dissent as currently experienced in a country claiming to be democratic. When civilian rule begins to exhibit authoritarian tendencies, the difference between khaki and agbada becomes symbolic rather than substantive.

Thus, the foiled coup should not be celebrated as a triumph of democracy, but interrogated as a revelation of democratic decay. It is a symptom of the political sclerosis afflicting Nigeria's postcolonial state where the civilian politicians deploy democratic rhetoric to mask authoritarian practice.

In the political history of Nigeria, coups have never been mere acts of power seizure; they have been historical signals communicative moments through which the nation's deeper contradictions, anxieties, and transformations are revealed (Samuel Decalo, 1990; Edward A. Nordlinger, 1977). From the very first coup of 1966 to the foiled attempt of 2025, each episode reflects a particular stage in Nigeria's political evolution, symbolizing both crisis and transition (Eghosa E. Osaghae, 1998). To understand the 2025 foiled coup as a historical signal, therefore, is to read it not only as a failed military plot but as a metaphor for the changing relationship between the Nigerian state, its people, and the idea of democracy itself.

The notion of the coup as a signal rests on the understanding that political events often speak beyond the intentions of their actors. Historically, coups in Nigeria have erupted at moments of profound disappointment in political leadership, particularly when corruption, electoral malpractice, and misgovernance eroded public confidence in civilian rule (Richard A. Joseph, 1987; Larry Diamond, 1988). The first coup of January 1966, led by Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, emerged as a response to the perceived moral and administrative decay of the First Republic (Chinua Achebe, 1983). Ironically, rather than resolving these crises, it intensified ethnic divisions and contributed to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War (Nigerian Civil War). Subsequent coups in 1975, 1983, and 1985

followed similar patterns, each framed as corrective interventions but ultimately deepening authoritarianism and weakening civic institutions (Samuel Decalo, 1990; Samuel P. Huntington, 1957). These cycles reveal that coups function as warning signals illuminating unresolved tensions within the state.

Against this backdrop, the foiled coup of 2025 must be situated within this historical continuum, but with a crucial distinction. Unlike its predecessors, the 2025 attempt failed largely due to internal democratic resilience rather than external intervention. The military hierarchy rejected the plot, segments of the public expressed mixed reactions shaped by historical memory, and regional bodies such as Economic Community of West African States reaffirmed the primacy of constitutional order (International Crisis Group, 2023). This marks a significant shift in Nigeria's political culture from a society that once tolerated military "corrective" interventions to one that increasingly views them as illegitimate and anachronistic (Afrobarometer, 2024). The failure of the coup is therefore not merely an event but a communicative moment signalling democratic transformation.

Every coup or attempted coup communicates layered meanings. The 2025 foiled coup signals the persistence of authoritarian legacies within segments of the political and security elite, underscoring that democratic consolidation remains an unfinished process (Guillermo O'Donnell, 1994). At the same time, it reflects the maturation of civic vigilance, as the rejection of the coup by citizens, media, and civil society demonstrates a growing democratic consciousness committed to constitutionalism (Freedom House, 2024). It also represents a historical reversal: whereas earlier coups often succeeded due to public acquiescence or support, this attempt failed partly because society refused to legitimize it (Larry Diamond, 1999).

Viewed from a pedagogical standpoint, the coup as a historical signal becomes a national lesson. It suggests that the survival of democracy depends not solely on institutional design but on collective commitment to democratic norms (Robert A. Dahl, 1971). The foiled coup thus performs a dual function: it exposes governance weaknesses while simultaneously reaffirming public and institutional commitment to constitutional continuity.

In the broader African context, the 2025 foiled coup resonates as a continental signal amid the resurgence of military takeovers in West Africa. While countries such as Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have experienced successful coups, Nigeria's ability to thwart one offers a counter-narrative of democratic resilience (African Union, 2023). It repositions Nigeria as a potential anchor of democratic stability in the region and suggests that lessons from its turbulent past may be gradually internalized.

Ultimately, the 2025 foiled coup should be understood not simply as a failed plot but as a historical signal of renewal. It demonstrates that while the structural conditions that once enabled coups persist, Nigeria has begun to develop the institutional and civic capacity to resist them (Francis Fukuyama, 2014). In this sense, the event symbolizes a turning point in Nigeria's political trajectory one where the echoes of past disruptions no longer inevitably produce collapse, but instead reinforce democratic resilience.

RESURRECTING DEMOCRACY: PATHWAYS FORWARD

The foiled coup of 2025 in Nigeria was more than a failed military attempt; it was a powerful signal of both the fragility and resilience of democracy in Africa's most populous nation. While the immediate threat was contained, the event highlighted the ongoing challenges of democratic consolidation and the urgent need for proactive measures to strengthen political institutions, civic culture, and leadership (Larry Diamond, 1999; Samuel P. Huntington, 1991). Resurrecting democracy in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that addresses structural weaknesses, socio-economic disparities, and the moral dimension of governance (Claude Ake, 1996).

One of the first steps toward democratic revival is the deepening of democratic values. Democracy is not merely a series of elections; it is a system built on transparency, accountability, and active citizen participation (Robert A. Dahl, 1971). Nigerians must view democracy as a shared responsibility rather than a ceremonial process. Civic education, anti-corruption initiatives, and inclusive governance are essential for embedding democratic principles in public consciousness (Transparency International, 2023). When citizens understand their rights and responsibilities, they become active defenders of democratic processes, reducing the space for authoritarian interventions (Afrobarometer, 2024).

Equally important is the strengthening of institutions. Courts, electoral bodies, and legislative assemblies must function independently and command public trust (Francis Fukuyama, 2014). The military, historically a frequent actor in Nigeria's political disruptions, must maintain professionalism and remain strictly apolitical (Samuel P. Huntington, 1957). Strong institutions create resilience, ensuring that democracy can withstand internal and external pressures. The failure of the 2025 coup demonstrated that when institutions act decisively and transparently, the rule of law prevails over force (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Socio-economic stability is another key pillar of democratic resilience. Economic inequality, unemployment, and insecurity have historically fueled political unrest and made coups appear attractive to disaffected groups (Seymour Martin Lipset, 1959). By promoting inclusive economic growth, expanding employment opportunities, and addressing regional disparities, Nigeria can reduce incentives for anti-democratic behavior (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Democracy becomes more meaningful and sustainable when citizens experience tangible improvements in their quality of life (Amartya Sen, 1999).

Nigeria's role in the wider African context is equally significant. With coups occurring in neighbouring countries such as Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, the 2025 foiled attempt sends a strong message about the viability of democracy in West Africa (African Union, 2023). Regional cooperation through organizations like Economic Community of West African States is critical for supporting constitutional order and deterring unconstitutional power seizures (ECDPM, 2023). Nigeria's experience can serve as a model for democratic resilience, demonstrating that vigilance and institutional strength can prevent the recurrence of military interventions.

Leadership remains the moral backbone of democracy. Ethical, responsible, and citizen-focused leadership is essential for rebuilding public trust and reinforcing democratic norms (John Rawls, 1971). Leaders who prioritize service over personal gain inspire confidence in governance and foster a culture where democracy is valued and protected. Without principled leadership, reforms risk remaining superficial and citizen engagement may weaken (Francis Fukuyama, 2014).

Finally, citizens themselves play a decisive role in sustaining democracy. The 2025 coup failed in part due to civic vigilance and resistance. Civil society organizations, the media, youth movements, and community networks must continue to hold leaders accountable and safeguard democratic space (Freedom House, 2024). Democracy thrives not simply because of institutions or laws, but because citizens are willing to defend it (Robert A. Dahl, 1971).

The foiled coup of 2025 thus presents both a warning and an opportunity. It warns of persistent threats rooted in authoritarian legacies, corruption, and socio-economic inequality, while also offering a pathway toward democratic renewal. By strengthening institutions, empowering citizens, promoting inclusive development, enhancing regional cooperation, and fostering ethical leadership, Nigeria can transform moments of crisis into opportunities for democratic consolidation (Larry Diamond, 2015). In doing so, the country can ensure that its democratic trajectory moves beyond mere survival toward resilience and sustainable governance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION THEORY

This article is anchored principally in Democratic Consolidation Theory, which explains how new or fragile democracies gradually become stable, legitimate, and resistant to authoritarian reversal. The theory focuses on the processes, institutions, and behaviours that transform democracy from a contingent political arrangement into a permanent and broadly accepted system of governance. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996, p. 5) provide the foundational formulation, a democracy is consolidated when it has become “the only game in town” behaviourally, because no significant national actors spend resources attempting to achieve their goals by undemocratic means, attitudinally, because even in adverse economic or political circumstances the overwhelming majority of citizens believe that democratic procedures are the most appropriate for governing collective life and constitutionally, because governmental and non-governmental forces become subject to and habituated to the resolution of conflict within specific laws, procedures, and institutions of the democratic process.

Samuel Huntington’s (1991) third wave of democratisation provided the historical context within which consolidation theory emerged. As dozens of countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa transitioned from authoritarian or military rule in the 1970s through 1990s, the central scholarly question shifted from “how does democracy begin?” to “what enables it to endure?” Larry Diamond (1999) advanced this framework by arguing that consolidation requires not merely the absence of coups but the deepening of democratic norms, the strengthening of civil society, the rule of law, and

inclusive political participation. Within this framework, the 2025 foiled coup in Nigeria can be read as evidence of partial but genuine attitudinal consolidation, the widespread civilian condemnation of the plot and the institutional military rejection of the conspiracy both reflect the progressive internalisation of democratic norms within Nigerian society and its armed forces (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Diamond, 1999).

However, this article insists that democratic consolidation theory, taken alone, offers an incomplete explanation of Nigeria's experience. The theory's dominant focus on institutions, norms and political behaviours must be supplemented by a rigorous analysis of the political economy conditions that shape whether democratic consolidation is possible in the first place. The foiled coup of 2025 did not arise in a political vacuum but emerged from the structural contradictions of Nigeria's rentier political economy and understanding those contradictions requires theoretical tools that democratic consolidation theory does not independently supply.

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

The political economy approach to democratic governance draws on the foundational insight of Seymour Martin Lipset (1959, p. 75) that "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy." Lipset's modernisation thesis established the empirical relationship between economic development measured through income, education, urbanisation, and industrialisation and democratic stability, arguing that socio-economic prosperity generates the conditions of political moderation, civic participation, and institutional trust that sustain democratic governance. While the simplistic determinism of the original formulation has been extensively critiqued (Przeworski et al., 2000), the core insight that structural economic conditions shape democratic prospects retains powerful explanatory force.

For Nigeria specifically, the most analytically relevant political economy framework is the rentier state theory, originally formulated by Hossein Mahdavy (1970) and systematically developed by Hazem Beblawi (1987) and Giacomo Luciani (1987). The theory argues that states deriving the majority of their revenues from external rents primarily natural resource extraction rather than from domestic taxation develop distinctive political economy pathology, the weakening of fiscal. Nigeria's dependence on petroleum revenues, which have averaged over 70% of government revenue and 90% of foreign exchange earnings across the Fourth Republic period (World Bank, 2023), constitutes a textbook rentier political economy, with profound consequences for democratic consolidation.

The rentier dynamic intersects with what Richard Joseph (1987) identifies as Nigeria's "prebendal" political system, a system in which political office is treated as a "prebend": a right to exploit public resources for personal and communal enrichment. In prebendal politics, elections are fought not for the expression of ideological preferences or competing policy programmes but for access to the state's distributive capacity. This means that political competition is simultaneously intensified and the stakes of office-holding are extremely high and hollowed out, the content of political contestation is reduced to elite bargaining over shares of resource rents rather than substantive democratic deliberation over governance alternatives (Joseph, 1987; Ake, 1996). The

consequences for democratic consolidation are severe and include weak party institutionalisation, high electoral volatility, personalisation of power, and the subordination of institutional capacity to patronage logic all flow directly from this prebendal structure.

Resource distribution and economic inequality constitute a further dimension of political economy that shapes democratic outcomes in Nigeria. The resource curse literature associated with Michael Ross (2001), Jeffrey Sachs and Andrew Warner (1995), and Terry Lynn Karl (1997) demonstrates that natural resource abundance can paradoxically undermine development and democratic governance through Dutch disease effects, the crowding out of productive investment, the weakening of institutional quality, and the financing of authoritarian state capacity. In Nigeria's case, the structural inequality produced by petroleum-financed elite enrichment with the country simultaneously one of sub-Saharan Africa's largest economies and the location of the world's highest absolute concentration of extreme poverty (World Bank, 2023) creates the socio-economic conditions that Lipset (1959) identified as fertile soil for democratic instability. High youth unemployment, economic exclusion, and the concentration of wealth within politically connected elites generate the reservoir of grievance from which coup plotters draw their justifications and, occasionally, their supporters (Diamond, 1988; Ake, 1996).

Elite interests and state capacity constitute the third and fourth pillars of the political economy of democratic resilience. Dankwart Rustow's (1970) analysis of the conditions for democratic transition argued that democracy emerges not from a convergence of values but from a compromise among elite actors with competing interests, a formulation subsequently developed by Adam Przeworski (1991) in his analysis of democracy and the market. Applied to Nigeria, this framework illuminates the 2025 coup attempt's political economy and the suspects were drawn disproportionately from the North Central, North East, and North West geopolitical zones (Guardian Nigeria, 2025), and security analysts identified their motivations as including the structural marginalisation of northern military officers under the Tinubu administration's shift in senior service appointments away from the northern dominance of the preceding Buhari era (TruthNigeria, 2025). This is elite exclusion, not ideological opposition to democracy, but rational-actor calculation by elite actors whose patronage access has been disrupted by a change in the resource distribution logic of the state (van de Walle, 2003; Joseph, 1987).

State capacity, the institutional ability to implement policies, maintains security, deliver services, and enforce the rule of law links political economy directly to democratic stability (Fukuyama, 2004; Rotberg, 2004). Weak state capacity in Nigeria is simultaneously a product of the rentier political economy and a cause of democratic vulnerability. That the 2025 coup was detected and foiled demonstrates a minimum threshold of state intelligence capacity. That it was nonetheless planned and reportedly included informants within the Presidential Villa itself (Premium Times, 2026) demonstrate the limits of that capacity and the continuing penetration of the security apparatus by actors with anti-democratic interests.

LINKING POLITICAL ECONOMY TO DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE AND FRAGILITY

The political economy perspective advanced in this article generates a coherent theoretical argument about the conditions under which democratic resilience is possible in Nigeria. Democracy is resilient not primarily because citizens love democracy in the abstract though Afrobarometer data confirms they do but because the specific configuration of elite interests, resource distribution patterns, and state institutional capacities makes democratic continuity more advantageous to more powerful actors than military intervention. In Nigeria in 2025, four structural conditions produced this outcome. First, the post-2015 professionalisation of the armed forces had altered the cost-benefit calculus of military intervention, unlike the 1983 or 1993 coups, which had broad elite support, the 2025 plot was a narrow conspiratorial operation whose organizers lacked institutional military support (The Africa Report, 2025; PRNigeria, 2025). Second, Nigeria's centrality to ECOWAS and the African Union's anti-coup normative architecture reinforced by the coordinated sanctions against the juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger had significantly raised the international costs of a successful coup (Arthur, 2025; GJIA, 2024). Third, the patronage architecture of the Nigerian state which distributes oil revenue through statutory allocations, political appointments, and federal contracts creates elite incentive structures that reward working within the democratic system rather than overthrowing it (Joseph, 1987; van de Walle, 2003). Fourth, the growing assertion of civic democratic consciousness evidenced in the #EndSARS protests of 2020 and the historic youth mobilisation of the 2023 elections have created a normative environment in which unconstitutional change of government faces popular rejection rather than popular legitimation (Arthur, 2025; Diamond, 1999).

Yet democratic fragility persists beneath these resilience factors precisely because the underlying political economy has not been fundamentally transformed. Mass poverty, structural unemployment, fiscal mismanagement, and the prebendal logic of political competition continue to generate the conditions of social discontent and institutional decay from which anti-democratic actors draw their resources and justifications. The sustainable path to democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires not merely the fortification of counterintelligence capacity important as that is but a transformation of the political economy itself from rentier extraction to productive investment, from patronage distribution to merit-based institutional governance, and from elite capture of resource rents to inclusive economic growth. As Claude Ake (1996, p. 132) argued in his foundational analysis of democracy and development in Africa, "democracy will not come and will not be sustained unless it is the kind of democracy that empowers people economically as well as politically" a formulation that retains its full analytical force three decades on.

The theoretical framework of this article thus integrates democratic consolidation theory's attention to institutional norms, behavioural regularities, and constitutional adherence with political economy's focus on resource distribution, elite interests, state capacity, and economic inequality producing a multi-causal account of why the 2025 foiled coup failed in Nigeria, why the structural conditions for coup attempts persist, and what structural transformations are necessary to move Nigeria's democracy beyond the tenuous resilience of the present toward genuine, durable, and substantive consolidation.

NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Nigeria's democratic system reflects a complex interplay between political liberalization, historical legacies of military rule, and the pressures of a rentier political economy (Richard A. Joseph, 1987; Larry Diamond, 1999). Since the country's return to civilian governance in 1999, successive administrations have grappled with the dual challenge of consolidating democratic institutions while navigating the distortions of an oil-dependent economy (World Bank, 2022). This uneasy balance has profoundly shaped the nature of Nigerian democracy, one that is procedurally stable but substantively fragile (Robert A. Dahl, 1971).

At the heart of Nigeria's political system lies a federal structure designed to manage diversity and distribute resources across ethnic, regional, and religious lines. The 1999 Constitution entrenched this federal character, seeking to prevent domination by any single group. Yet, in practice, federalism has often functioned less as a mechanism for inclusion and more as a framework for elite bargaining (Rotimi Suberu, 2001). Political competition has become closely tied to control over state resources, leading to what scholars describe as prebendal politics, a system in which public office is treated as a means of personal and communal enrichment (Richard A. Joseph, 1987). This pattern has deeply influenced electoral behavior, party organization, and policymaking, embedding economic incentives within the core of Nigeria's political system.

The political economy of Nigeria's democracy is equally shaped by its status as a rentier state (Hazem Beblawi & Giacomo Luciani, 1987). The reliance on oil revenues has weakened the fiscal accountability that typically binds citizens and governments in a tax-based economy (Terry Lynn Karl, 1997). Instead, wealth distribution depends heavily on federal allocations, enabling ruling elites to maintain loyalty through patronage rather than performance. This dynamic has limited the growth of a productive private sector and constrained opportunities for genuine political competition (International Monetary Fund, 2023). As a result, democratic consolidation has been hindered by corruption, weak institutions, and cyclical crises of legitimacy (Francis Fukuyama, 2014).

Despite these structural weaknesses, Nigeria's democratic system has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Elections, though often contentious, have become regular, and peaceful transfers of power, as seen in 2015, have reinforced democratic norms (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2015; Freedom House, 2024). Civil society organizations, independent media, and judicial activism have also played critical roles in checking executive overreach (Transparency International, 2023). However, the persistence of inequality, unemployment, and insecurity continues to erode citizens' trust in the democratic process (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The widening gap between democratic ideals and lived realities fuels discontent, which in turn provides fertile ground for anti-democratic sentiments within and outside the military (Samuel P. Huntington, 1991).

The 2025 foiled coup must be situated within this broader political economy context. It did not arise in a vacuum but emerged from longstanding frustrations rooted in governance failures and economic hardship (International Crisis Group, 2025). Yet, the swift collapse of the attempt and the unified civilian resistance against it suggests a maturing democratic consciousness. Nigerians, despite their grievances, have largely rejected military intervention as a solution to civilian incompetence (Afrobarometer,

2023). This response reflects a subtle but significant shift in the political culture: democracy, however imperfect, is now perceived as the legitimate framework for political contestation and reform (Larry Diamond, 1999).

Ultimately, the interplay between Nigeria's democratic system and its political economy underscores both the vulnerability and vitality of the state. The same economic structures that perpetuate corruption and elite dominance also create incentives for maintaining stability (Douglass C. North, 1990). The 2025 incident exposes the fault lines of Nigeria's democracy but also reveals its capacity for self-correction. The challenge moving forward lies in transforming the political economy from one of extraction and patronage to one of production and accountability. Only then can Nigeria's democracy move beyond survival toward genuine consolidation and, in doing so, offer a renewed model for democratic resilience across Africa.

THE POSSIBILITY OF A SUCCESSFUL COUP IN NIGERIA AGAIN

The possibility of a successful coup in Nigeria is a question that must be approached with analytical rigour rather than optimistic assumption. The post-2025 reshuffle of the entire military high command appointment of new chiefs of defence staff, army, navy, and air force within weeks of the coup's detection (TruthNigeria, 2025; Nigeria Info FM, 2026) reflects a rational coup-proofing logic that Quinlivan (1999) identifies as characteristic of civilian governments with residual fear of military intervention, the use of frequent elite rotation, ethnic and regional balancing in leadership appointments, and the cultivation of competing loyalties within the officer corps to reduce the probability of organised military action.

A second structural change that substantively reduces the probability of a successful coup is the demonstrable shift in Nigerian and broader African public attitudes toward military rule. The claim that African citizens have universally rejected military coups requires empirical qualification, but the available survey evidence does provide meaningful support for a conditional version of the argument. Afrobarometer's Round 9 surveys, conducted across 39 African countries between 2021 and 2023, find that 66% of citizens across the continent prefer democracy to any other system of government, and an equivalent proportion (66%) outright reject military rule with even larger majorities rejecting one-man (80%) and one-party (78%) rule (Afrobarometer, 2024; Journal of Democracy, 2025). Within Nigeria specifically, there is empirical evidence of declining popular legitimation of military intervention as a governance alternative, rooted in the collective memory of political repression, economic isolation, and institutional degradation associated with the Abacha and Babangida eras (Akinola & Makombe, 2025; Oluwabiyi & Duruji, 2021).

However, this normative rejection of military rule coexists with a deeply troubling conditional tolerance, the same Afrobarometer Round 9 data show that 53% of Africans across 39 countries would support a military takeover if elected leaders 'abuse power for their own ends' and the figure rises to 58% among citizens aged 18 to 25 (Afrobarometer, 2024; CODESRIA Bulletin, 2025; Brookings, 2024). As the Journal of Democracy analysis (2025) puts it, African publics are not endorsing permanent military rule but asking militaries to 'reset' democracy by removing abusive civilian leaders, a demand that

coup leaders have historically exploited to legitimise their accession while rarely fulfilling the intention of a prompt return to civilian governance. The lesson from Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger where popular celebrations of coups rapidly gave way to what UNDP (2023) terms 'buyer's remorse' as economic conditions worsened and electoral timelines were repeatedly postponed reinforces rather than refutes the danger of this conditional tolerance. For Nigeria, where governance deficits, economic deterioration, and public cynicism about the political class are extensively documented (Chatham House, 2023; Diamond, 1988), the conditional tolerance threshold is a live political variable rather than a resolved question.

The persistence of the structural conditions that have historically enabled coups constitutes the most analytically significant challenge to any sanguine assessment of Nigeria's coup-proofness. Belkin and Schofer (2003), in their systematic empirical analysis of coup risk in 165 countries, identify four structural determinants of coup probability: weak civil society, a history of past coups, low socio-economic development, and the absence of institutional constraints on executive power. Socio-economic indicators remain deeply unfavourable: the World Bank (2023) estimates that approximately 104 million Nigerians live below the international poverty line, youth unemployment consistently exceeds 30% in official estimates and substantially more in survey-based measures, and the 2023 naira devaluation and fuel subsidy removal have intensified household economic stress to historically unprecedented levels. Finally, the institutional constraints on executive power INEC, the judiciary, and the National Assembly have been variously compromised by executive capture, patronage dynamics, and credibility deficits that reduce their effectiveness as democratic accountability mechanisms (Tandfonline, 2025; Chatham House, 2023).

At the regional level, the ECOWAS anti-coup normative architecture provides a genuine, though analytically qualified, deterrent against a successful coup in Nigeria. The ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) established an explicit regional prohibition on unconstitutional changes of government and created mechanisms including suspension from ECOWAS, economic sanctions, and the potential authorisation of military intervention for responding to democratic reversals (RSISINTERNATIONAL, 2025; ECDPM, 2023). Nigeria's centrality to this architecture is unique as the largest economy and most populous state, Nigeria is simultaneously the primary funder and primary beneficiary of the ECOWAS deterrence framework. A successful coup in Abuja would trigger the very sanctions architecture that Abuja has championed, generating an international isolation whose economic costs in trade disruption, investment flight, and loss of multilateral financing would be disproportionately large given Nigeria's deep integration with the global economy (Crisis Group, 2023; ECDPM, 2023).

Synthesising these analytical threads produces a nuanced empirical assessment of coup probability in contemporary Nigeria. The probability of a successful coup has declined meaningfully relative to the pre-1999 historical baseline, for reasons documented above. Several structural conditions continue to sustain meaningful coup risk. The combination of deep economic inequality and socio-economic frustration, intra-military grievances rooted in ethnic and regional appointment patterns, the documented conditional tolerance

of military intervention among significant segments of the Nigerian population (Afrobarometer, 2024), the incomplete professionalisation of the officer corps, and the ongoing credibility deficits of democratic institutions collectively constitute what Belkin and Schofer (2003) would characterise as a moderate-to-high structural coup risk environment. The analytical consensus in the comparative civil-military relations literature from Nordlinger (1977) through Decalo (1990), Harkness (2016), and more recent Afrobarometer-based analyses cautions against conflating a reduced probability of success with a negligible probability of attempt. As the evidence of the 2025 episode demonstrates, the two are empirically distinct the coup attempt was sufficiently organized, resourced, and motivated to have succeeded under different institutional circumstances.

The ultimate determinants of Nigeria's long-term coup resilience, therefore, are not the counterintelligence capabilities that detected the 2025 plot though these are valuable but the governance reforms that address the structural conditions from which coup motivations grow, accountable institutions that close the legitimacy gap between democratic form and democratic substance, economic policies that distribute the benefits of growth more equitably and reduce the structural unemployment and inequality that fuel popular disaffection, merit-based and transparent management of military appointments and promotions that reduce the intra-military grievances that make officers susceptible to political manipulation and the sustained deepening of civil society capacity to hold both civilian and military actors accountable within constitutional frameworks. Diamond (1999, p. 284) identified this challenge with prescient precision: 'democracy will not become stable until it becomes meaningful' a formulation that retains its full analytical force in Nigeria a quarter-century on.

CONCLUSION

The foiled coup in Nigeria should not be viewed merely as a criminal conspiracy but as a critical historical moment of reckoning. It reflects deeper structural contradictions within Nigeria's democratic project, where formal institutions endure but substantive democratic values accountability, participation, and legitimacy are increasingly eroded (Robert A. Dahl, 1971; Larry Diamond, 1999). This condition aligns with what scholars describe as "democratic recession," where civilian regimes hollow out democratic norms while maintaining procedural facades (Larry Diamond, 2015). Thus, the real danger to Nigeria lies less in military adventurism and more in the sustained subversion of democratic principles by the civilian elite, a phenomenon also identified in neopatrimonial governance systems in Africa (Richard Joseph, 1987).

Paradoxically, this failed coup presents Nigeria with a moment of possibility, an opportunity to reimagine and reconstruct democracy as a moral and institutional project. Scholars such as Claude Ake (1996) argue that democracy in Africa must transcend electoralism and become rooted in social justice, equality, and public service delivery. Rebuilding democratic legitimacy therefore requires not only institutional reforms but also ethical leadership and a renewed social contract between the state and its citizens (Francis Fukuyama, 2014).

In the final analysis, the coup's failure is not the end of the story but the beginning of a necessary national conversation about the meaning and practice of democracy in Nigeria.

As Samuel P. Huntington (1991) notes, democratic systems survive not merely through institutional design but through the commitment of political actors to democratic norms. The pressing question before Nigeria, therefore, is whether it will heed this warning and undertake meaningful reform or continue along a path that risks future systemic rupture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If democracy in Nigeria is to be resurrected, reform must transcend superficial institutional adjustments and confront the political economy of exclusion. However these are the recommendations.

Institutional Autonomy and Rule of Law

Independent institutions form the backbone of democratic stability. The judiciary, legislature, and electoral commission must be insulated from executive capture through constitutional safeguards and transparent appointment processes. Genuine separation of powers is non-negotiable for restoring public trust.

Economic Justice and Inclusive Growth

Democracy cannot survive amidst mass poverty and structural unemployment. Nigeria's leadership must abandon neoliberal orthodoxy and adopt a developmental state model that prioritizes production, redistribution, and welfare (Mkandawire, 2001). Social justice is not an adjunct to democracy; it is its foundation.

Civic Reawakening and Participatory Politics

Civil society, trade unions, student movements, and grassroots organizations must reclaim the democratic space. The citizen must cease to be a spectator in governance. Participatory democracy through local assemblies, digital activism, and decentralized governance can rebuild ownership of the state by the people.

These transformations require not just policy shifts but a moral renaissance and a return to ethics in leadership and collective accountability.

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