

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN NIGERIA POLITICAL SPACE: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA UNDER PRESIDENT MOHAMMADU BUHARI'S ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

Nigeria has experienced a decline in its democratic quality and an increase in authoritarian tendencies under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. This post examines the causes and consequences of this phenomenon, drawing on recent reports and analyses from various sources. Some of the causes include Buhari's intolerance of dissent, his interference with the judiciary and the media, his use of state security agencies to harass and detain critics, and his failure to address the economic and security challenges facing the country. There have been growing concerns about the state of democracy in Nigeria and these developments have implications for the democratic development of Nigeria, as well as its stability and prosperity. The seemingly quietness and/or non-challant observation about these developments from political stakeholders and the citizens calls for concern. Addressing the problem of democratic backsliding is crucial for Nigeria's democratic development. It requires a commitment to upholding democratic principles. The study acknowledges the seeming problems and proffer solutions on how Nigeria can work towards strengthening its democracy, fostering inclusive development, and upholding the values of democracy both domestically and internationally. The study concludes that Nigeria's democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence have negative consequences for the country's stability, development, and international reputation. It calls for urgent reforms and interventions to reverse this trend and restore Nigeria's democratic credentials.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, Authoritarian resurgence, Implications, Political Space, President Muhammadu Buhari, Administration.

Background to the Study

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and largest economy, has been experiencing a decline in its democratic quality since the return of civilian rule in 1999. The country has witnessed increasing violations of human rights, media freedom, judicial independence, and civil society space under the successive administrations of Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo, Umaru Yar'Adua, Goodluck Jonathan, and Muhammadu Buhari. The administration of President, Buhari, who was elected in 2015 and reelected in 2019, has been accused of reverting to his authoritarian style of the 1980s, when he was a military dictator (Human Rights Watch. (2020). Buhari's government has used state security agencies to detain, harass, and intimidate critics, journalists, activists, and opposition figures on charges of treason and terrorism (Amnesty International, 2017; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020; Premium Times, 2020 and Premium Times, 2021). The government has also ignored court orders to release some of its detainees, such as the prominent journalist and former presidential candidate Omoyele Sowore (The Guardian, 2019 and Al Jazeera, 2020). Moreover, the government has failed to

address the multiple security challenges facing the country, such as the Islamist insurgency of Boko Haram, the separatist agitation of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the farmer-herder conflicts, and the banditry and kidnapping in the northwestern states (Human Right Watch, 2020 and Lara-Otaola, 2022).

The democratic backsliding in Nigeria has serious implications for the country's stability, development, and regional role. Nigeria is a key partner for the United States and other Western countries in combating terrorism, promoting trade and investment, and advancing democracy and human rights in Africa (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Democratic backsliding according to Adetula & Adeyi (2018) is a process in which democratically elected leaders undermine or dismantle democratic norms and institutions to consolidate their power and weaken their opposition. It is a global phenomenon that affects both established and emerging democracies, and poses a serious threat to the stability and legitimacy of the democratic system. While there may be instances of political repression, Nigeria's democracy is still strong overall. The country has witnessed peaceful transitions of power between different political parties, indicating a healthy democratic system. Allegations of repression should be investigated thoroughly, but they should not undermine the progress made in democratizing the country.

Meanwhile, the concentration of power in Nigeria's executive branch and the weak checks and balances are indicative of democratic backsliding. The president's authority is often unchecked, leading to misuse of power and limited accountability. This undermines the principles of democratic governance; the reason being that Nigeria's government structure is based on a presidential system, which naturally concentrates power in the executive. While there may be challenges in ensuring proper checks and balances, efforts have been made to strengthen institutions and mechanisms of accountability. The ongoing fight against corruption and establishment of anti-corruption agencies are positive steps towards ensuring democratic governance. However, the lack of media freedom and the intimidation of journalists in Nigeria demonstrate democratic backsliding. Journalists face harassment, arrest, and intimidation when reporting on government officials or critical issues. This suppression of press freedoms limits the transparency and accountability necessary for a functioning democracy. While there may be isolated incidents of media repression, Nigeria has a vibrant and diverse media landscape that actively criticizes the government and reports on sensitive topics. Multiple private media outlets and social media platforms provide a platform for citizens to express their opinions and hold those in power accountable (Adetula & Adeyi, 2018).

The pervasive corruption in Nigeria's political system is a clear sign of democratic backsliding. Corruption erodes democratic values and institutions, as it allows those in power to exploit public resources for personal gain, undermines the rule of law, and prevents equitable development. While corruption remains a challenge, the Nigerian government has taken steps to address the issue. The implementation of anti-corruption agencies and initiatives such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Whistleblower Policy demonstrate a commitment to combating corruption. Additionally, civil society organizations and citizens have been actively advocating for transparency and accountability in the country.

There are different types and causes of democratic backsliding as opined by Okeke-Uzodike & Okeke-Uzodike (2021), depending on the motivations and methods of the leaders who initiate it. Some leaders exploit grievances among their supporters, such as economic inequality, cultural identity, or perceived injustice, and claim that the existing political system is responsible for perpetuating them.

This type of backsliding occurs when entrenched interests, such as the military or the elite that were displaced by a democratic transition seek to regain their influence and privileges. They then use undemocratic means, such as coups, violence, or corruption, to overthrow or undermine the elected government. Democratic backsliding can have severe consequences for the quality and durability of democracy, as well as for the well-being and rights of the citizens. It can lead to political polarization, social unrest, economic decline, human rights violations, and international isolation (Diamond & Plattner, 2019).

However, democratic backsliding is not inevitable or irreversible: it can be prevented, reversed, or mitigated by various actors and factors. There are ways to prevent, resist, or reverse it, both domestically and internationally. Some of these strategies include: delaying institutional capture, by using legal or constitutional means to challenge the backsliders' actions; leveraging legal tactics, by pursuing judicial review or prosecution of the backsliders' misconduct; supporting corruption probes, by exposing and sanctioning the backsliders' abuse of power; strengthening independent voices, by supporting civil society, media, and academia that can hold the backsliders accountable; and investing in "vaccines", by promoting education, civic engagement, and democratic culture that can inoculate the public against antidemocratic appeals (Masiyiwa & Nwachukwu, 2021).

The causes and consequences of Nigeria's democratic backsliding are complex and multifaceted. Some of the factors that have contributed to the decline of democracy include: the persistence of ethnic and religious conflicts; the weak institutionalization of political parties; the prevalence of corruption and patronage; the lack of accountability and transparency; the poor delivery of public services; the insecurity and violence caused by insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and bandits; and the economic hardship and inequality faced by many Nigerians. These challenges have eroded public trust and confidence in democratic institutions and processes, and have created opportunities for authoritarian actors to exploit popular grievances and manipulate electoral outcomes (Okeowo, 2021).

The implications of Nigeria's slide toward authoritarianism are not only domestic but also regional and global. Nigeria plays a significant role in promoting peace and stability in West Africa and beyond, as well as in advancing economic integration and development across the continent. Nigeria is also a strategic partner of the United States and other Western countries in countering terrorism, enhancing trade and investment, and supporting human rights and democracy. If Nigeria fails to reverse its democratic backsliding and restore its democratic credentials, it risks losing its credibility and influence as a regional leader and a global actor. Moreover, it could jeopardize its own stability and security, as well as that of its neighbours and allies. This paper therefore seeks to investigate the causes and consequences of political backsliding and authoritarian resurgence in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Over the past few years, Nigeria has witnessed several incidents and actions that have raised concerns about the state of democracy in the country. These include the shrinking of political space, increasing restrictions on freedom of speech and press, intimidation of political opponents, and disregard for the rule of law. Under President Buhari's administration, there has been a crackdown on civil society organizations, media outlets, and activists critical of the government. Various cases of human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests and detentions, have been reported, indicating a regression in democratic principles.

Furthermore, the electoral process has been marred by irregularities, voter intimidation, and violence. The independence of electoral institutions has come under question, leading to doubts about the credibility and fairness of the elections. These instances of democratic backsliding have significant implications for democratic development in Nigeria. A decline in democratic practices undermines the participation of citizens in the political process, erodes public trust in democratic institutions, and hampers accountability and transparency in governance. Moreover, democratic backsliding hinders economic development, as investors are wary of investing in countries with unstable political environments. It also negatively impacts Nigeria's international reputation and its relations with other democratic nations. Addressing the problem of democratic backsliding is crucial for Nigeria's democratic development. It requires a commitment to upholding democratic principles, including protecting human rights, ensuring the independence of institutions, promoting freedom of speech and press, and conducting free and fair elections.

By acknowledging and seeking solutions to the problem of democratic backsliding, Nigeria can work towards strengthening its democracy, fostering inclusive development, and upholding the values of democracy both domestically and internationally, hence the study.

Objective of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate the causes and consequences of democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence in Nigeria.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. Investigate the main drivers and indicators of democratic backsliding in Nigeria;
- ii. Examine how democratic backsliding has affected the quality of governance, service delivery, accountability, and human rights in Nigeria;
- iii. Determine how democratic backsliding has contributed to the escalation of communal conflicts, insecurity, and violent extremism in Nigeria;
- iv. Assess how democratic backsliding has impacted Nigeria's role and reputation in regional and international affairs;
- v. Suggest the possible strategies and interventions needed to reverse or mitigate democratic backsliding and promote democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Overview of Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Resurgence

In recent years, many observers have expressed concern about the global trend of democratic decline, or what some scholars call democratic backsliding. By democratic backsliding, political analysts generally mean that a democracy is slipping backwards in terms of its democratic performance, and that there are signs of rising authoritarianism.

Democratic backsliding can take different forms and have different causes. Some analysts distinguish between three types of backsliding efforts: grievance-fueled illiberalism, opportunistic authoritarianism, and entrenched-interest revanchism. In cases of grievance-fueled illiberalism, a political leader mobilizes a popular grievance, such as economic inequality, cultural identity, or corruption, and claims that the existing political system is responsible for it. The leader then argues that it is necessary to dismantle democratic norms and institutions, such as checks and balances, civil liberties, or media freedom, to redress the underlying wrongs. Examples of this type of backsliding include Hungary under Viktor Orbán, Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (Matthijs, 2018; Cianetti, *et al.*, 2018; Bakke & Sitter, 2020 & Iulia-Sabina, 2021).

In cases of opportunistic authoritarianism, a political leader comes to power through conventional democratic means, such as elections or coalitions, but later turns against democracy for the sake of personal political survival. The leader uses various tactics to weaken the opposition, co-opt the judiciary, manipulate the electoral system, or undermine civil society. Examples of this type of backsliding include Russia under Vladimir Putin, Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić, and Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro (Cianetti, *et al.*, 2018).

In cases of entrenched-interest revanchism, a powerful interest group that was displaced by a democratic transition uses undemocratic means to reassert its claims to power. The interest group may be the military, the monarchy, the aristocracy, or the religious establishment. The group may resort to violence, intimidation, propaganda, or legal maneuvers to overthrow or undermine the elected government. Examples of this type of backsliding include Thailand under the military junta, Egypt under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and Myanmar under the Tatmadaw (Iulia-Sabina, 2021).

While these types of backsliding differ in their motivations and methods, they share a common feature: they all aim to undermine countervailing institutions that are designed to keep them in check. These institutions include independent courts, free media, vibrant civil society, accountable bureaucracy, and international organizations. By weakening these institutions, backsliding leaders seek to consolidate their power and reduce the chances of democratic reversal. The phenomenon of democratic backsliding poses a serious challenge for both domestic and international actors who seek to defend and promote democracy. However, it is important to note that backsliding is not inevitable or irreversible. Many democracies have resisted or recovered from backsliding attempts in the past. Moreover, the global share of democratic countries remains close to its all-time high. Therefore, while it is necessary to be vigilant and proactive in confronting democratic erosion, it is also premature to declare the end of democracy.

THE MAIN DRIVERS AND INDICATORS OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN NIGERIA

Democratic backsliding is a process of gradual erosion of democratic institutions, norms and values that leads to a decline in the quality and effectiveness of democracy. Democratic backsliding can take various forms, such as constitutional manipulation, electoral fraud, media repression, civil society crackdown, human rights violations, corruption and abuse of power (Adetula, & Adeyi, 2018 and Campbell, 2020).

Nigeria, Africa's most populous and largest economy, has experienced several episodes of democratic backsliding since its return to civilian rule in 1999. Despite holding six consecutive presidential elections, Nigeria's democracy remains fragile and faces multiple challenges that threaten its consolidation and sustainability (Falola & Heaton, 2008 and Aiyede, 2019).

Some of the main drivers of democratic backsliding in Nigeria according to Cianetti, *et al*, (2018) & Okeke (2020) are:

Weak institutions: Nigeria's democratic institutions, such as the electoral commission, the judiciary, the legislature, the security agencies and the anti-corruption bodies, lack independence, capacity and credibility to perform their functions effectively and impartially. They are often subject to political interference, manipulation and capture by powerful interests that undermine their accountability and legitimacy (Bratton & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016 and Diamond & Plattner, 2019).

Ethnic and religious polarization: Nigeria's diverse society is divided along ethnic and religious lines that shape political identity and mobilization. Ethnic and religious sentiments are often exploited by politicians to gain votes and power, fueling mistrust, intolerance and violence among different groups. The lack of inclusive representation and equitable distribution of resources also contributes to grievances and conflicts that weaken national cohesion and stability (Matthijs, 2018 and Mustapha & Ehrhardt, 2018).

Poor governance and development: Nigeria's governance performance has been poor in terms of delivering public goods and services, ensuring human security and promoting human development. Nigeria ranks low on various indicators of democracy, rule of law, human rights, corruption, poverty, inequality, health and education. The failure of governance to meet the needs and aspirations of the people erodes public trust and confidence in democracy and creates opportunities for alternative actors, such as violent extremists and separatists, to challenge the state authority and legitimacy (Ezrow & Frantz, 2011 & Lührmann *et al.*, 2018).

COVID-19 pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing challenges of democratic backsliding in the global world and Nigeria is not immune against it. It created a public health emergency that strained the already weak health system and disrupted the socio-economic activities. The pandemic also provided a pretext for some political actors to impose restrictive measures that curtailed civil liberties, such as freedom of expression, assembly and movement. The pandemic also affected the electoral process by delaying some elections, limiting voter participation and increasing the risk of fraud and violence.

Some of the main indicators of democratic backsliding in Nigeria are:

Constitutional manipulation: Some political actors have attempted to manipulate the constitution to extend their tenure or remove term limits. For example, in 2006, former President Olusegun Obasanjo tried to amend the constitution to allow him to run for a third term, but failed due to public opposition and resistance from some lawmakers (Fatile *et al.*, 2011). In 2020, some governors from the ruling party also proposed a constitutional amendment to extend their tenure beyond two terms, but faced criticism from civil society and opposition parties (Ademola, 2021).

Electoral fraud: Electoral fraud: Nigeria's elections have been marred by various forms of fraud and irregularities that undermine their credibility and integrity. These include voter registration fraud, vote buying, ballot box snatching, multiple voting, result falsification, intimidation and violence. For example, in 2023, the presidential election was tainted by technical malfunctions and allegations of fraud. The opposition parties called for the cancellation of the election and the resignation of the head of the electoral commission. The commission failed to transmit the results from the polling units on its online portal, raising doubts about the transparency of the process. Some videos circulating on social media also showed people being coached on how to thumb print ballots for a particular party. These incidents have eroded public trust in the electoral system and cast a shadow over Nigeria's democracy.

EFFECTS OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING ON THE QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE, SERVICE DELIVERY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NIGERIA

In recent years, Nigeria has experienced some signs of democratic backsliding as submitted by Mustapha & Ehrhardt (2018); Campbell & Page (2021) and Ademola (2021) and, such as:

- The postponement of the 2019 general elections by a week due to logistical and security issues, which raised doubts about the independence and credibility of the electoral commission.
- The widespread reports of irregularities, violence, intimidation, vote-buying, and low turnout in the 2019 elections, which undermined the legitimacy of the outcomes and led to numerous legal disputes.
- The passage of a controversial social media bill in 2020 that sought to criminalize the dissemination of false information and impose harsh penalties on offenders, which was widely criticized as an attempt to stifle free speech and dissent.
- The suspension of Twitter's operations in Nigeria in 2021 by the federal government, which accused the platform of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence by deleting a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari that threatened secessionist groups in the southeast.
- The crackdown on peaceful protesters demanding an end to police brutality and bad governance in 2020 by security forces, which resulted in dozens of deaths and injuries, as well as arbitrary arrests and harassment of activists and journalists.
- The weakening of local government autonomy and accountability by state governors, who often interfere with local elections, withhold statutory allocations, and appoint caretaker committees instead of elected officials.
- The increasing polarization and fragmentation of the political landscape along ethnic, regional, and religious lines, which fuels communal violence and hampers national cohesion and consensus-building.

These trends have negatively affected the quality of governance, service delivery, accountability, and human rights in Nigeria in various ways. For instance, from Adesoji (2011)'s submission:

- i. Democratic backsliding has eroded public trust and confidence in democratic institutions and processes, which reduces citizen participation and civic engagement.
- ii. Democratic backsliding has enabled impunity and corruption among political elites, who exploit their positions for personal gain at the expense of public welfare.

- iii. Democratic backsliding has impaired the delivery of basic services such as health care, education, water supply, electricity, and infrastructure to millions of Nigerians who depend on them for their survival and well-being.
- iv. Democratic backsliding has violated the fundamental rights and freedoms of Nigerians to express their opinions, associate with others, protest peacefully, access information, and seek justice.
- v. Democratic backsliding has increased the vulnerability of marginalized groups such as women, youth.

CONTRIBUTION OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING TO THE ESCALATION OF COMMUNAL CONFLICTS, INSECURITY, AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and largest economy, but it faces many challenges that threaten its stability and development. One of these challenges is democratic backsliding, which refers to the erosion of democratic institutions and norms by political actors who seek to consolidate power and undermine accountability. Democratic backsliding can have serious consequences for the escalation of communal conflicts, insecurity, and violent extremism in Nigeria. According to Freedom House (2021), Nigeria's democracy score has declined from 4.5 out of 7 (with 7 being the least free) in 2010 to 3.9 in 2020, indicating a deterioration of civil liberties and political rights. Some of the factors that contribute to this decline include:

Electoral malpractice and violence: Nigeria has a history of flawed and violent elections that undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the democratic process. In the 2019 general elections, for example, there were widespread reports of vote buying, intimidation, ballot box snatching, and killings by security forces and political thugs. The 2023 presidential election, which resulted in the victory of Bola Tinubu of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) party, was also marred by irregularities and violence that sparked protests and legal challenges by the opposition.

Weak institutions and rule of law: Nigeria's democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, the legislature, the electoral commission, and the anti-corruption agencies, are often compromised by political interference, corruption, and lack of capacity. This undermines their ability to check and balance the executive branch, protect human rights, ensure electoral integrity, and enforce accountability. For instance, in 2019, President Muhammadu Buhari suspended the chief justice of Nigeria over allegations of corruption, a move that was widely seen as an attempt to influence the outcome of the presidential election.

Shrinking civic space and media freedom: Nigeria's civil society and media face increasing restrictions and harassment by the authorities, especially when they criticize or expose government policies or actions. The government has used various laws, such as the Cybercrime Act, the Terrorism Act, and the Hate Speech Bill, to arrest and prosecute activists, journalists, bloggers, and social media users for expressing dissenting views or exposing corruption. The government has also shut down or suspended media outlets, such as Radio Biafra and Daar Communications, for allegedly inciting violence or spreading misinformation.

These factors have contributed to the escalation of communal conflicts, insecurity, and violent extremism in Nigeria in several ways:

1. They have increased political polarization and mistrust among different ethnic, religious, and regional groups, who perceive the government as favoring some groups over others or excluding them from power and resources. This fuels resentment and grievances that can be exploited by violent actors, such as Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), bandits, kidnappers, cattle rustlers, separatists, and militia groups.
2. They have weakened the state's capacity and legitimacy to provide security and justice for its citizens, especially in remote and rural areas where state presence is minimal or absent. This creates a security vacuum that is filled by non-state actors who often resort to violence to assert their authority or advance their interests. It also creates a demand for self-defense or vigilante groups who may clash with other communities or security forces.
3. They have reduced the opportunities for dialogue and cooperation among different stakeholders who can work together to address the root causes and drivers of conflict and violence. These include political parties, civil society organizations, religious leaders, traditional rulers, community leaders, youth groups, women groups, and media. Without inclusive and participatory platforms for dialogue and cooperation, these groups may resort to violence or secession to pursue their interests and grievances. This can undermine the stability and development of the country (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

IMPACT OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING ON NIGERIA'S ROLE AND REPUTATION IN REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

One of the main factors that has eroded Nigeria's democracy is the persistent insecurity that plagues the country. Nigeria faces multiple threats from various armed groups, such as Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), bandits, kidnappers and secessionists (Falola & Heaton, 2008). These groups have killed thousands of people, displaced millions and disrupted social and economic activities. The Nigerian government has struggled to contain these threats, despite receiving support from regional and international partners. The security forces have also been accused of committing human rights abuses, such as extrajudicial killings, torture and arbitrary arrests, against civilians and suspects. These actions have eroded public trust and confidence in the government and the security institutions.

Another factor that has weakened Nigeria's democracy is the rampant corruption that pervades the public and private sectors. Corruption is a major obstacle to good governance, development and accountability in Nigeria. According to Transparency International, Nigeria ranked 149 out of 180 countries in the 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), (2020), with a score of 25 out of 100. Corruption affects various aspects of Nigeria's society, such as health, education, infrastructure, justice and security. It also undermines the credibility and legitimacy of the electoral process, which is essential for democracy. For instance, in the 2019 general elections, there were reports of vote buying, intimidation, violence and manipulation of results by political actors. These practices have diminished the quality and integrity of Nigeria's elections and reduced public participation and representation.

A third factor that has impaired Nigeria's democracy is the shrinking civic space that limits the freedom and rights of citizens and civil society organizations. Civic space is defined as

"the set of conditions that allow civil society organizations and individuals to engage in dialogue, advocacy and collective action" (CIVICUS). However, in Nigeria, civic space has been under attack from various sources, such as restrictive laws, harassment, intimidation and violence. For example, in 2019, the Nigerian government passed the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA), which gives the government sweeping powers to regulate and dissolve civil society organizations. The government has also used the Cybercrime Act of 2015 and the Terrorism Prevention Act of 2011 to arrest and prosecute journalists, activists and critics for expressing dissenting views online or offline. Furthermore, the government has deployed security forces to disperse peaceful protests and rallies by civil society groups and citizens demanding for better governance and accountability.

These factors have had negative implications for Nigeria's role and reputation in regional and international affairs. On the regional level, Nigeria's democratic backsliding has undermined its leadership and influence in West Africa and the African continent. Nigeria has been a key player in promoting peace, security and democracy in the region through its involvement in organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU). However, Nigeria's own democratic challenges have reduced its moral authority and credibility to intervene or mediate in other countries' crises or conflicts. For instance, Nigeria's response to the 2020 coup d'état in Mali was seen as weak and inconsistent by some observers, who questioned Nigeria's commitment to democracy and human rights (Fund for Global Human Rights, 2021).

On the international level, Nigeria's democratic backsliding has damaged its reputation and image among its allies and partners. Nigeria has been a strategic partner for many countries in areas such as counter-terrorism, trade, development and human rights. However, Nigeria's deteriorating democracy has raised concerns among some of these countries about its stability and reliability as a partner. For example, in 2020, the United States imposed visa restrictions on some Nigerian officials involved in undermining the 2019 elections or violating human rights. The United Kingdom also threatened to impose sanctions on some Nigerian officials responsible for violence against peaceful protesters during the #EndSARS movement in 2020. These actions have signaled a growing dissatisfaction and distrust with Nigeria's democratic performance by some of its key allies.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS TO REVERSE OR MITIGATE DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND PROMOTE DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

Democratic backsliding can take various forms, such as electoral fraud, media censorship, human rights violations, corruption, and repression of civil society and opposition groups. Democratic backsliding can have negative consequences for political stability, economic development, social cohesion, and regional security. Nigeria's democratic backsliding is not a new phenomenon, but rather a continuation of a long-standing trend that has been exacerbated by various factors, such as weak institutions, poor governance, ethnic and religious divisions, poverty and inequality, insecurity and terrorism, and external interference (Nwankwo & Ojielo, 2006). Nigeria's democracy has been under constant pressure from both internal and external forces that seek to undermine its foundations and exploit its vulnerabilities. Nigeria's democracy is also hampered by the kleptocratic capture of local government by elites who use public resources for personal gain and patronage networks.

This deprives local communities of basic services and accountability mechanisms, and fuels communal conflicts over land and resources.

Nigeria's democratic backsliding has serious implications for its stability, security, and prosperity, as well as for its role and influence in the region and the world. Nigeria is a key partner of the United States and other international actors in combating terrorism, promoting trade and investment, and advancing human rights and democracy in Africa. Nigeria's democratic backsliding also undermines its own aspirations to become a major global player and a leader of the African Union (Diamond, 2015).

Therefore, it is imperative that Nigeria reverses or mitigates its democratic backsliding and promotes democratic consolidation. Democratic consolidation is a term that refers to the process of strengthening and deepening democracy by ensuring that democratic institutions and norms are respected, protected, and improved. Democratic consolidation also entails addressing the underlying causes of democratic backsliding, such as poverty, inequality, insecurity, corruption, and social exclusion.

Given the magnitude and complexity of the challenges facing Nigeria's democracy, there is no simple or quick solution to reverse or mitigate democratic backsliding. However, there are some possible strategies and interventions that could help to improve the situation and promote democratic consolidation in Nigeria. These include:

- **Strengthening electoral institutions and processes:** Nigeria needs to reform its electoral system to ensure that it is transparent, credible, inclusive, and accountable. This involves improving the independence and capacity of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), enhancing voter registration and education, ensuring adequate security and logistics for elections, promoting civic engagement and participation, and enforcing electoral laws and sanctions for violators.
- **Supporting media freedom and civil society:** Nigeria needs to protect and promote the role of independent media and civil society organizations in informing and mobilizing the public, exposing corruption and malpractice, advocating for human rights and democratic values, and holding the government accountable. This involves ensuring a conducive legal and regulatory environment for media and civil society operations, providing financial and technical assistance to media outlets and civil society groups, fostering collaboration among different actors in the media and civil society sectors, and countering misinformation and propaganda.
- **Promoting good governance and anti-corruption:** Nigeria needs to improve its governance system to ensure that it is responsive, effective, efficient, equitable, and accountable. This involves strengthening the rule of law and judicial independence.
- Supporting credible and inclusive electoral reforms that ensure free, fair, transparent, and peaceful elections at all levels of government. This includes strengthening the independence and capacity of the electoral commission (INEC), enhancing voter education and participation, improving security and logistics, promoting dialogue and cooperation among political parties and stakeholders, and ensuring accountability for electoral malpractices.
- Strengthening democratic institutions and checks and balances that safeguard the rule of law, human rights, and accountability. This includes reforming the judiciary, the

legislature, the anti-corruption agencies, the security sector, and the media to make them more effective, responsive, and independent. It also involves empowering civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, labor unions, religious groups, women's groups, youth groups, and other social movements to monitor and advocate for democratic governance.

- Promoting national unity and social cohesion that foster a sense of belonging and citizenship among Nigeria's diverse groups. This includes addressing the root causes of communal conflicts, such as land disputes, resource competition, ethnic rivalry, religious intolerance, and political manipulation. It also involves promoting dialogue, reconciliation, and peace building initiatives that build trust, tolerance, and cooperation among different communities.
- Enhancing economic development and social welfare that improve the living standards and opportunities of Nigerians, especially the poor, the marginalized, and the vulnerable. This includes implementing sound macroeconomic policies that foster growth, stability, and diversification of the economy. It also involves investing in human capital development that enhances education, health, and skills of Nigerians. It also entails expanding social protection programs that reduce poverty, inequality, and vulnerability of Nigerians.

These are some of the possible strategies and interventions to reverse or mitigate democratic backsliding and promote democratic consolidation in Nigeria. However, these strategies and interventions require political will, public support, and international cooperation to be effective and sustainable. Therefore, it is important that Nigerians and their partners work together to achieve their common goals of democracy, peace, and development.

Summary

This paper examined the phenomenon of democratic backsliding in Nigeria's political space under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari. The paper defines democratic backsliding as the erosion of democratic institutions, norms and values by the incumbent government, and identifies the main drivers and consequences of this process in Nigeria. The paper argues that democratic backsliding in Nigeria has implications for the country's democratic development, such as undermining the rule of law, weakening civil society, increasing political violence and instability, and reducing public trust and participation. The paper explores the causes and consequences of democratic backsliding in Nigeria as being complex and multifaceted. The researcher brought into the fore, the implications of democratic backsliding in Nigeria and its consequences on country's stability, development, and international reputation. The research study is based on a review of relevant literature and web sources. It does not claim to be exhaustive or definitive, but rather aims to stimulate further discussion and research on this important topic.

Conclusion

In this paper, the researcher examined the causes and consequences of democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence in Nigeria, a country that was once hailed as a model of democratic transition in Africa. The researcher submitted that the main factors behind this phenomenon are the weak institutionalization of democracy and the rule of law, which has enabled the executive branch to undermine the independence and effectiveness of other branches of government, such as the judiciary and the legislature, as well as civil society and

the media. The persistent socio-economic challenges and insecurity that have eroded public trust and confidence in democratic institutions and processes, and created opportunities for populist and authoritarian leaders to exploit popular grievances and fears as well as the lack of a strong and cohesive opposition that can offer a viable alternative to the ruling party and hold it accountable for its actions and policies.

The study concludes that the impact of democratic backsliding against the Nigeria's political stability, economic development, human rights, regional leadership, and international reputation cannot be over-emphasized.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and the arguments of the researcher, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Nigerian people must demand and defend their democratic rights and freedoms, and participate actively and peacefully in electoral processes.
2. The Nigerian civil society must continue to monitor and expose human rights violations and corruption, and advocate for democratic reforms and accountability.
3. The Nigerian media must uphold professional standards and ethics, and provide accurate and balanced information to the public.
4. The Nigerian political parties must respect internal democracy and diversity, and engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation with each other.
5. The Nigerian government must respect the constitution and the rule of law, and address the root causes of socio-economic problems and insecurity.
6. The international community must support Nigeria's democratic aspirations and institutions, and apply diplomatic pressure and sanctions when necessary.

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