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The Politics of Patronage, Corruption and Regime Change in Africa: The Nigerian Experience

Dr Johnson Alalibo Sinikiem; & Dr Anthony Rufus
Department of Political Science, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State
Corresponding Author: honsajohnson@yahoo.co.uk
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Abstract
This study examines the dynamics of patronage, corruption and regime change in Nigeria, situating the country within broader African political patterns. Despite frequent regime transitions ranging from military interventions to democratic alternations, the analysis demonstrates that patronage networks have remained remarkably resilient. Employing a qualitative, historical-comparative methodology, the study draws on archival documents, government reports, policy papers and peer-reviewed literature to trace the evolution of elite practices from the military era to the Fourth Republic. Analytical attention is given to the interplay between oil-dependent fiscal structures, institutional configurations and elite coalitions. The findings reveal that corruption functions not merely as illicit appropriation but as a strategic tool that binds elites, facilitates distributive politics and stabilizes governing coalitions. Anti-corruption rhetoric, while politically salient, often serves electoral mobilization purposes rather than producing substantive institutional reform. The persistence of patronage is further reinforced by weak institutional autonomy, structural dependence on oil rents and entrenched elite pacts that prioritize coalition stability over reform. The study contributes theoretically by integrating neo-patrimonial, rentier state and political settlement frameworks to explain the durability of patronage in resource-dependent polities. Policy implications suggest that sustainable democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires structural fiscal diversification, strengthened oversight autonomy and reconfiguration of elite bargains toward programmatic governance. The article underscores that regime change alone is insufficient to dismantle patronage; structural and institutional transformation is essential for genuine accountability.

Keywords: Patronage politics, Corruption, Regime change, Nigeria, Neo-patrimonialism, Rentier state

Introduction

The persistence of patronage politics and systemic corruption remains one of the most enduring features of post-colonial governance in Africa. While transitions from military to civilian rule and periodic electoral turnovers have been celebrated as markers of democratic progress, scholars continue to debate whether such regime changes have fundamentally altered the underlying political order or merely reshuffled elite coalitions. Across much of the continent, political authority has often been organized through personalized networks of exchange in which access to state resources is mediated by loyalty, ethnicity, party affiliation or regional alignment (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Chabal & Daloz, 1999). These dynamics have been widely conceptualized under the rubric of neo-patrimonialism; a system in which formal bureaucratic institutions coexist with, and are frequently subordinated to, informal patron-client networks (Erdmann & Engel, 2007).

Within this framework, corruption is not simply a pathological deviation from institutional norms but often operates as a mechanism of political consolidation and elite accommodation. In rent-dependent states, particularly those reliant on oil revenues, the control and distribution of state rents become central to political survival (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987; Karl, 1997). Rather than dismantling patronage structures, regime transitions may reconfigure access to rents while preserving the logic of distributive politics. The relationship between regime change and corruption in Africa raises a critical analytical question: does political turnover signify structural transformation or does it represent elite circulation within a stable patronage order?

Nigeria provides a particularly instructive case for interrogating this puzzle. As Africa's most populous country and one of its largest oil producers, Nigeria has experienced repeated regime changes, including military coups justified on anti-corruption grounds and competitive electoral turnovers framed around reformist agendas. From the collapse of the First Republic in 1966 to the democratic transition of 1999 and the historic electoral defeat of an incumbent ruling party in 2015, regime change has often been accompanied by public denunciations of corruption and promises of systemic renewal (Joseph, 1987; Suberu, 2007). Yet empirical assessments suggest that patronage networks have remained resilient across these transitions, adapting rather than disappearing (Lewis, 2007; Omotola, 2010).

The 2015 electoral transition which marked the first defeat of an incumbent president at the polls was widely interpreted as a watershed in Nigeria's democratic development (Onapajo, 2019). The campaign was heavily anchored in anti-corruption rhetoric and promises of institutional reform. However subsequent analyses have raised questions about the depth of structural change achieved, noting patterns of elite realignment and the persistence of distributive politics within party structures

and federal institutions (Agbiboa, 2019; Kew, 2016). This continuity invites a more systematic inquiry into the structural relationship between patronage, corruption and regime change in Nigeria.

This article therefore addresses the following core question: Why does regime change in Nigeria rarely dismantle patronage politics despite recurring anti-corruption rhetoric? Relatedly, it asks:

vi. How are patronage networks embedded within Nigeria's political and fiscal architecture?
vii. In what ways does corruption function as a mechanism of elite coalition maintenance?
viii. Does regime change in Nigeria transform the political settlement or merely redistribute access to state rents among competing elites?

The central argument advanced in this article is that regime change in Nigeria does not fundamentally disrupt the patronage-based political settlement; rather it reorganizes elite coalitions within a neo-patrimonial and rent-dependent framework. Anti-corruption discourse, while politically potent, functions primarily as a mobilizing and legitimizing instrument during moments of transition, but it has not translated into structural transformation of the underlying political economy.

This study contends that understanding regime change in Nigeria requires moving beyond electoral milestones and anti-corruption rhetoric to interrogate the deeper political settlement that sustains elite cohesion. Until the structural incentives embedded in Nigeria's rent-dependent and patronage-driven order are fundamentally reconfigured, regime change is likely to continue producing elite realignment rather than systemic transformation.

Statement of the Problem

Despite frequent regime changes in Nigeria from military interventions to democratic transitions, patronage networks and systemic corruption have remained deeply entrenched, undermining governance, accountability and democratic consolidation (Suberu, 2001; LeVan, 2019). While reformist rhetoric often accompanies electoral or military transitions, these efforts rarely dismantle the personalized distribution of state resources or alter the structural dependence on oil rents, allowing elite coalitions to maintain control and redistribute wealth selectively (Beblawi, 1987). This persistent interplay between patronage, corruption and regime change raises critical questions about why political turnover fails to produce meaningful institutional transformation, highlighting a significant gap in understanding the structural and political mechanisms sustaining elite dominance in resource-dependent African states.

Conceptual Clarifications

A rigorous analysis of patronage, corruption and regime change in Nigeria requires conceptual precision. These terms are frequently deployed in both scholarly and policy discourse, yet they carry layered meanings shaped by comparative political analysis, Africanist scholarship and

broader debates in political economy. Rather than treating them as static categories, this study situates each concept within its dominant scholarly interpretations and clarifies how it is operationalized in this article.

Patronage refers broadly to the discretionary distribution of material benefits, offices or opportunities by political actors to individuals or groups in exchange for political support. In comparative politics, patronage is often distinguished from programmatic redistribution in that it is selective, personalized and contingent upon loyalty rather than universalistic criteria (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Patronage in an African context has been interpreted as a mechanism of political survival in environments characterized by weak institutionalization and limited bureaucratic autonomy (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). Joseph's (1987) influential study of Nigeria conceptualized the phenomenon as prebendalism, a system in which public office is appropriated as a source of private benefit for office holders and their constituencies. While prebendalism is not identical to patronage, it underscores how state offices become embedded within distributive networks. In this article, patronage is understood not merely as episodic favoritism but as a systemic logic through which political authority is consolidated and maintained.

Then closely related but yet analytically distinct is the concept of clientelism. Clientelism denotes a dyadic or network-based exchange relationship in which patrons provide targeted benefits in return for political allegiance, often structured through brokers and intermediaries (Scott, 1972; Stokes, 2005). The comparative literature emphasizes contingency and reciprocity as defining features: benefits are conditional upon continued political support (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). In many African settings, clientelism intersects with ethnic, regional, and partisan identities, reinforcing vertical linkages between elites and constituencies (van de Walle, 2001). Contemporary scholarship cautions against viewing clientelism as uniquely African or inherently incompatible with democratic processes (Hicken, 2011). Instead it is increasingly understood as a mode of political organization that can coexist with formal democratic institutions. For the purposes of this study, clientelism represents the micro-foundational mechanism through which broader patronage systems are operationalized.

The concept of neo-patrimonialism provides the macro-structural lens connecting these practices to state organization. Originating in Weberian sociology and adapted in African political analysis, neo-patrimonialism describes systems in which formal bureaucratic institutions exist but are penetrated and often subordinated by personalized networks of authority (Erdmann & Engel, 2007). In such systems, rulers maintain power through a combination of legal-rational authority and informal distribution of resources. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) argued that many African regimes exhibit hybrid characteristics: constitutions, elections and formal ministries coexist with informal patronage hierarchies. Critics have noted that the concept risks analytical overextension if applied too broadly (Pitcher, Moran, & Johnston, 2009). Nevertheless, when carefully specified, neo-patrimonialism remains useful for explaining the fusion of public and private interests in resource-dependent states. In the Nigerian case, the persistence of distributive politics across

military and civilian regimes suggests a political order in which formal democratic turnover does not necessarily dismantle informal elite networks.

Political corruption is a more contested concept as often defined normatively as the abuse of public office for private gain (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). While this definition remains influential, it has been critiqued for assuming a clear boundary between public and private spheres that may be institutionally blurred in neo-patrimonial contexts (Gupta, 1995). From a political economy perspective, corruption can function as a tool of coalition management, facilitating elite bargains and stabilizing ruling arrangements (Khan, 2005). In resource-rich states, access to rents may be strategically allocated to maintain political settlements (Karl, 1997). This does not normalize corruption but situates it within broader incentive structures. Anti-corruption discourse has frequently accompanied regime transitions, yet structural patterns of rent distribution have endured. Accordingly, this study treats corruption not only as illegal appropriation but also as a politically embedded practice intertwined with patronage and clientelism.

Regime change refers to the alteration of governing authority through either constitutional or extra-constitutional means. Comparative scholarship distinguishes between democratic transitions, electoral turnovers, coups d'état, and revolutionary transformations (Huntington, 1991; Levitsky & Way, 2010). In the African context, regime change has often oscillated between military interventions justified on reformist grounds and competitive multiparty elections (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). However electoral turnover does not automatically entail transformation of the political settlement. As Levitsky and Way (2010) argue in their analysis of competitive authoritarian regimes, formal alternation in office may occur without deep institutional restructuring. In Nigeria the 1966 coup, the 1999 democratic transition and the 2015 electoral defeat of an incumbent party represent distinct forms of regime change, yet each unfolded within an enduring distributive political economy.

Theoretical Anchoring

The conceptual clarifications outlined above require a coherent theoretical architecture capable of explaining persistence and change within Nigeria's political order. This study draws primarily on neo-patrimonial theory, rentier state theory and political settlement theory. These approaches illuminate how distributive politics is structurally embedded in Nigeria's state formation, how oil rents reinforce elite coalition management and why regime change often produces elite reconfiguration rather than systemic transformation. The objective is not to aggregate theories mechanically, but to integrate them into a causal framework that explains continuity across regime transitions.

Neo-patrimonial theory provides the foundational lens. Building on Weber's distinction between patrimonial and legal-rational authority, scholars of African politics adapted the concept to describe hybrid regimes in which formal bureaucratic institutions coexist with informal networks of personalized rule (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Erdmann & Engel, 2007). In neo-patrimonial systems, public office is formally differentiated from private interest, yet in practice it becomes instrumentalized for personal and factional distribution.

Authority is sustained less through impersonal rule-bound administration than through loyalty networks maintained by material incentives. As Pitcher, Moran and Johnston (2009) caution, the concept must not be applied indiscriminately; however when specified in relation to distributive politics and elite bargaining, it retains strong explanatory value.

The causal expectation derived from neo-patrimonial theory is straightforward: where political authority is sustained through personalized distribution of resources, regime change will not automatically dismantle patronage networks. Instead new elites are likely to appropriate and redirect existing distributive mechanisms to consolidate power. This logic aligns with Joseph's (1987) analysis of prebendal politics in Nigeria, where state offices function as sites of organized appropriation tied to constituency-based expectations. Under such conditions anti-corruption campaigns may delegitimize incumbents, but the underlying patronage architecture remains intact because it constitutes the principal mechanism of political survival.

While neo-patrimonialism explains the fusion of formal institutions and informal authority, rentier state theory clarifies the material foundation of distributive politics in resource-dependent economies. Initially articulated in analyses of Middle Eastern oil economies (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987), and further elaborated in political economy studies of petro-states (Karl, 1997; Ross, 2012), rentier theory argues that when states derive a substantial portion of revenue from externally generated rents rather than domestic taxation, accountability dynamics are altered. Governments become less dependent on broad-based fiscal bargaining and more reliant on strategic distribution of rents to secure elite and societal compliance.

Now appling to Nigeria, rentier theory suggests that oil revenues centralize fiscal authority and expand the pool of distributable resources available for coalition management. The expectation here is that the availability of oil rents intensifies patronage politics by lowering the cost of elite accommodation. Rather than investing in institutional reform that might constrain discretionary allocation, ruling coalitions have incentives to preserve opaque distribution channels that facilitate political control. Empirical studies of oil-dependent states indicate that such revenue structures can entrench corruption and weaken institutional oversight (Karl, 1997; Ross, 2012). In Nigeria's federal system where revenue allocation formulas, derivation principles and centrally controlled disbursements shape intergovernmental relations oil rents become the lifeblood of elite negotiation.

To bridge structural resource dependence and elite agency, this study also draws on political settlement theory. Emerging from development and institutional economics, political settlement theory conceptualizes the state as an outcome of negotiated elite bargains that determine the distribution of power and resources (Khan, 2010; North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009). A political settlement is stable when powerful actors perceive that the benefits of cooperation outweigh the risks of exclusion or violent contestation.

The relevance of this framework to Nigeria lies in its emphasis on elite coalition management. Regime transitions of either the options of military interventions or elections can be interpreted as moments of renegotiation within the political settlement rather than wholesale ruptures. Anti-corruption rhetoric may function strategically to justify reallocation of rents or to delegitimize rival factions. However unless the underlying balance of power shifts sufficiently

to sustain a new institutional equilibrium, distributive practices are likely to persist. Khan (2005, 2010) argues that corruption can be embedded within political settlements as a mechanism for stabilizing coalitions in contexts where formal enforcement capacity is limited. This insight is critical: corruption is not merely a deviation from institutional norms but may serve as political currency within elite bargaining processes.

Integrating these three frameworks yields a coherent analytical model. Neo-patrimonial theory explains the personalization of authority and the entanglement of public office with private distribution. Rentier state theory accounts for the material resource base that sustains large-scale patronage networks in oil-dependent economies. Political settlement theory clarifies how these distributive arrangements stabilize elite coalitions and why regime change often reflects renegotiation rather than structural transformation.

From this integrated framework, several causal expectations guide the empirical analysis:

- **Elite Coalition Persistence:** Because political authority is sustained through distributive networks, regime change is more likely to reorganize patronage channels than dismantle them.
- **Corruption as Political Currency:** Corruption operates as a mechanism of coalition maintenance, facilitating elite accommodation within a rent-dependent state.
- **Rhetorical Reform vs. Structural Continuity:** Anti-corruption discourse during regime transitions serves as a legitimizing instrument but does not necessarily alter the underlying political settlement.
- **Rent-Driven Stability:** The centrality of oil revenues reduces incentives for fiscal accountability and reinforces discretionary allocation practices across administrations.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design that is anchored in historical-comparative analysis. Secondary sources including government reports, archival documents, policy papers, academic monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles were systematically reviewed to trace the evolution of patronage and corruption in Nigeria from the military era to the present Fourth Republic. Analytical focus was placed on identifying patterns of elite behavior, fiscal allocation and institutional interaction, with more attention to the nexus between resource rents and political settlement structures. The study triangulates empirical evidence with theoretical frameworks; neo-patrimonial theory, rentier state theory, and political settlement theory to interpret causal mechanisms underpinning regime change and patronage persistence. This approach allows for an in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of political dynamics while maintaining analytical rigor and originality.

Patronage and Corruption in African Political Order: A Contextual Framing

Across much of post-colonial Africa, the state has functioned not merely as an administrative apparatus but as the principal arena for resource distribution and political bargaining. The weakness of autonomous private sectors, the colonial legacy of centralized extraction and the

strategic importance of controlling state offices have combined to make political power synonymous with access to economic opportunity (Bayart, 1993; Young, 1994). In this context patronage politics has often emerged less as an aberration than as a rational survival strategy within competitive elite environments.

Scholars of African politics have long emphasized that rulers must continually manage complex coalitions composed of ethnic, regional, military and economic actors. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) argue that political authority in many African regimes has historically depended on the maintenance of patron-client networks that link central elites to peripheral constituencies. These networks provide material incentives; public employment, contracts, licenses and selective benefits in exchange for political loyalty. Van de Walle (2001) further contends that fiscal crises and economic decline in the late twentieth century intensified reliance on patronage, as shrinking formal economies increased competition for state-controlled rents. In such environments, patronage becomes a mechanism for mitigating elite defection and preventing fragmentation.

Patronage in African political systems should not be reduced to mere favoritism or opportunistic graft. Rather it functions as a stabilizing instrument in contexts where formal institutions lack deep societal embeddedness. Boone (2003) demonstrates that African rulers often rely on distributive strategies to negotiate authority across territorially diverse societies. Arriola (2009) shows that access to financial resources is crucial for coalition-building in multiparty systems, particularly where party institutionalization is weak. Patronage thus operates as a survival strategy in structurally competitive political arenas, enabling incumbents to assemble minimum winning coalitions while discouraging rival mobilization.

Within this distributive order, corruption frequently assumes a redistributive dimension. While conventional governance literature defines corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016), political economy scholarship suggests that corrupt practices may also serve as mechanisms of coalition maintenance. Khan (2005) argues that in developing contexts characterized by limited enforcement capacity, informal rent allocation can stabilize political settlements by compensating powerful actors. In resource-rich states this dynamic is amplified: rents derived from natural resources are often distributed selectively to maintain regime stability (Karl, 1997; Ross, 2012). The allocation of contracts, procurement opportunities, and public-sector appointments becomes intertwined with political survival.

This perspective does not normalize corruption but situates it within incentive structures that shape elite behavior. In several African cases, anti-corruption campaigns have accompanied regime transitions, yet structural incentives for rent distribution have remained intact. Cheeseman (2015) observes that in hybrid regimes, electoral competition may intensify clientelistic distribution rather than diminish it, as incumbents mobilize state resources to secure electoral advantage. Likewise de Waal (2015) conceptualizes political authority in parts of Africa as embedded in "political marketplaces," where loyalty is transacted through material inducements. These analyses converge on a critical insight: corruption often functions as political currency within patronage-based systems.

The relationship between electoral turnover and elite continuity further complicates narratives of democratic consolidation. The introduction of multiparty elections across Africa in the 1990s was widely interpreted as a watershed moment (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). However subsequent scholarship has shown that electoral alternation does not necessarily transform underlying political settlements. Levitsky and Way (2010) demonstrate that competitive authoritarian regimes can sustain meaningful electoral competition while preserving incumbent advantages and informal power networks. Even in cases of opposition victory, entrenched elite structures frequently adapt rather than dissolve.

Empirical patterns across the continent illustrate this phenomenon. In countries such as Kenya and Zambia, alternation in power has occurred within relatively stable elite circles, often reflecting reconfigured coalitions rather than systemic institutional reform (Cheeseman, 2015). Ghana is frequently cited as a more positive example of democratic consolidation, yet even there, party competition has been accompanied by clientelistic mobilization and intense patronage distribution (Bob-Milliar, 2012). These cases suggest that regime alternation in Africa commonly entails renegotiation of elite bargains within existing distributive frameworks.

Military coups historically justified as corrective interventions against corruption, also reveal similar continuities. Decalo (1990) notes that many post-coup regimes reproduced patronage structures they initially condemned. The rhetoric of reform often legitimized elite displacement, but the material logic of distributive politics persisted. Thus, whether regime change occurs through ballots or bullets, the underlying incentive structures frequently remain stable.

This broader continental pattern provides an essential backdrop for interpreting Nigeria's experience. Nigeria shares many of the structural features identified in comparative African scholarship: centralized revenue extraction, intense inter-elite competition, weak programmatic party institutionalization and significant dependence on natural resource rents. As in other African states, regime transitions in Nigeria have repeatedly been accompanied by anti-corruption narratives and promises of reform. Yet the endurance of patronage networks and rent-mediated coalition politics suggests that political turnover has often involved redistribution rather than transformation.

The Nigerian Political Settlement: Historical Foundations

Tracing the historical foundations of Nigeria's political settlement reveals how oil wealth, centralized authority and institutional engineering have shaped the country's distributive politics and elite coalitions. This section focuses on two interconnected phases: the centralization of oil and patronage during the extended military era (1966–1999) and the institutionalization of competitive patronage in the Fourth Republic (1999–present). Instead of offering a detailed chronological narrative, the aim here is to clarify how structural arrangements and political strategies consolidated patronage networks that continue to shape Nigeria's political settlement.

Centralization of Oil and Patronage (Military Era)

Nigeria's discovery of petroleum in commercial quantities in the late 1950s marked the beginning of a fundamental shift in the country's political economy. By the early 1970s, crude oil had become the dominant source of foreign exchange and government revenue, transforming the state into a classic rentier economy in which political authority depended on controlling oil rents rather than taxation or broad-based economic production (Watts, 2009; Pérouse de Montclos, 2023). This oil dependency intensified under successive military regimes, which centralized fiscal authority and institutionalized distributive politics.

Following the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), the federal government, led by successive military heads of state, consolidated control over oil revenues and fiscal arrangements. The central government's ability to amass substantial resource rents allowed it to command loyalty from subordinate elites and subordinate sub-national actors through patronage, resource allocation and employment opportunities. As oil revenues grew, so did the scope of state distribution, effectively transforming Nigeria into a petrostate, where the state's survival and legitimacy hinged on its ability to dispense economic rents.

Fiscal federalism in Nigeria became highly centralized as a result of these patterns. Although the 1960 independence constitution envisioned a federal system with relatively autonomous regions, military interventions gradually eroded this balance, concentrating fiscal and administrative powers at the center (Offensend, 1976; Babalola, 2019). The federal government's control over oil revenues allowed it to determine revenue allocation formulas and disbursement, often at the expense of states' financial autonomy. This centralization entrenched distributive dependency among sub-national elites, who increasingly relied on federal transfers for political survival and local patronage networks.

Military rulers also used oil rents to consolidate patron-client networks within the bureaucracy and armed forces. Appointments to strategic portfolios, unilateral budgetary decisions and allocations for infrastructural projects became instruments for cementing loyalty and neutralizing opposition. The relationship between oil revenue and political survival over time became deeply embedded: control of the federal apparatus equated to access to vast oil rents and thus to the ability to distribute resources to key constituencies. Corruption flourished in this environment not only as individual enrichment but also as a mechanism of elite negotiation and accommodation (Montclos, 2023; Watts, 2009).

The structural legacies of this era are significant. By the time of Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, both political actors and administrative elites had adapted to a system in which the federal center monopolized the most valuable revenue streams and used them to manage political alliances. Oil became a political currency that underpinned distributive politics, patronage networks and institutional incentives that outlasted military governance.

Democratization and Competitive Patronage (Fourth Republic)

The transition to democratic rule in 1999 initiated a new phase in Nigeria's political settlement one characterized by competitive patronage rather than overt military patronage, but the underlying logic of resource distribution remained consistent. The Fourth Republic

institutionalized formal democratic processes, yet the mechanisms through which political authority was exercised continued to reflect the centralized patronage networks established under military rule.

A distinct feature of this period has been the formalization of power-sharing arrangements intended to manage ethno-regional diversity and political competition. The Federal Character Principle, enshrined in the 1979 constitution and reinforced under the 1999 constitution and subsequent commissions, aims to ensure equitable representation of Nigeria's diverse ethno-regional groups in public appointments, civil service positions and political offices (Ibade & Mukoro, 2023).

The practice of zoning as an informal political arrangement whereby major political offices are rotated among Nigeria's geopolitical regions reflects elite strategies for maintaining coalition stability. While not constitutionally mandated, zoning arrangements have shaped presidential nominations and party politics in the Fourth Republic as a way to manage perceptions of inclusion and mitigate sectional tensions (Ohazuruike, 2022).

Federal character and zoning have become institutionalized features of Nigeria's political settlement. They function not merely as symbols of inclusion but as mechanisms through which distributive benefits are negotiated and political support is secured across elite blocs. Adherence to federal character quotas has often been uneven, shaped by political negotiation and partisan calculation. Critics argue that the principle has not fully achieved its intended goals of cohesion and equity, partly because its implementation is susceptible to political manipulation and patronage (Ibade & Mukoro, 2023), reinforcing existing power hierarchies rather than transforming them.

Competitive patronage in the Fourth Republic is further sustained by party financing structures that depend heavily on access to federal funds and discretionary allocations. Nigeria's major political parties such as the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) have been described as "umbrella" formations that aggregate diverse interests around the control of the federal center (E.g Wim, 2024). This is consistent with broader patterns in which political parties in rent-dependent states often lack coherent ideological foundations, instead functioning as vehicles for distributing patronage and securing elite alliances.

These institutional arrangements have significant implications for Nigeria's political settlement. Rather than post-1999 democratic reforms dismantling the patronage systems established under military rule, they have adapted to formal democratic structures and become embedded within them. The centralization of oil rents, the formalization of federal character and zoning and the competitive scramble for party control have collectively ensured that patronage remains a core feature of Nigeria's political order.

Patronage, Corruption and Regime Change in Nigeria

Nigeria presents a paradox that lies at the center of this article: regime transitions, military to civilian, civilian to civilian and even opposition alternation have not dismantled patronage politics but rather reorganized it. Drawing on neo-patrimonial theory, rentier state theory and

political settlement theory, this section demonstrates that corruption in Nigeria functions not merely as administrative decay but as political currency that sustains elite coalitions within a rent-dependent political settlement. Regime change, therefore operates less as institutional rupture and more as coalition reconfiguration.

Corruption as Elite Glue

Neo-patrimonial scholarship has long argued that African states combine formal bureaucratic institutions with personalized rule, where access to public office becomes a mechanism for distributing material benefits (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Erdmann & Engel, 2007). In Nigeria this logic is deeply intertwined with oil rent centralization. Rentier state theory posits that states dependent on externally generated rents, particularly oil derive revenue without taxing citizens extensively, weakening accountability and strengthening distributive patronage networks (Beblawi, 1987; Karl, 1997; Ross, 2012). The Nigerian federation exemplifies this pattern: oil revenue collected centrally is redistributed through federal allocation mechanisms, creating incentives for elite competition over access to the state rather than productive economic transformation (Watts, 2004; Suberu, 2001).

Within this configuration, corruption performs a coalition-binding function. Political settlement theory helps clarify this dynamic: stable political orders require elite bargains that distribute resources in ways that prevent violent contestation (Khan, 2010; North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009). In Nigeria the distribution of oil rents through contracts, budgetary allocations, appointments and security expenditures provides the material basis for such elite accommodation. What is conventionally labeled "grand corruption" often reflects negotiated access to state rents among ruling coalitions.

The military era institutionalized this structure. Following the 1970s oil boom, centralized revenue expanded dramatically, while oversight mechanisms remained weak (Lewis, 2007; Osaghae, 1998). Successive regimes relied on patronage distribution to maintain military cohesion and manage regional elites. The concentration of oil rents enabled large-scale discretionary spending and corruption scandals such as those during the Babangida and Abacha years were not aberrations but expressions of a rent-anchored political order (Lewis, 2007; Watts, 2008).

In the Fourth Republic the pattern evolved but did not disappear. Competitive elections increased the number of actors requiring incorporation into patronage networks. Party financing, legislative constituency projects, security votes and procurement systems became institutionalized channels for distributive politics (Omotola, 2010; Joseph, 2014). From a neo-patrimonial perspective, corruption operates as elite glue: it sustains coalition loyalty by ensuring that access to office translates into material returns. Removing corruption abruptly would destabilize the coalition unless alternative resource-sharing mechanisms were institutionalized.

Recent analyses reinforce this interpretation. Studies of "state capture" in Nigeria show how political and economic elites influence regulatory institutions, procurement systems and security agencies to secure continued access to rents (Human and Environmental Development

Agenda [HEDA], 2019; Page, 2018). These practices are not episodic; they are embedded in the political settlement. Thus corruption functions less as administrative pathology and more as a mechanism of elite stabilization within a rent-dependent neo-patrimonial order.

Anti-Corruption as Electoral Mobilization

If corruption stabilizes elite coalitions, anti-corruption rhetoric functions as a powerful mobilizational tool. Throughout Nigerian history, regime changes have frequently been justified in anti-corruption terms. Military coups in 1966, 1983 and 1985 were explicitly framed as corrective interventions against civilian corruption (Osaghae, 1998; Joseph, 1987). Yet military regimes themselves reproduced patronage structures, confirming that anti-corruption narratives often serve as legitimacy strategies rather than structural reform commitments.

In the democratic era, anti-corruption campaigns became central to electoral competition. The 2015 transition from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the All Progressives Congress (APC) marked the first alternation of power at the federal level. The APC campaign emphasized corruption scandals under the Jonathan administration and framed regime change as a moral and institutional reset (LeVan, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2015). However theoretical expectations derived from political settlement theory suggest caution. When opposition coalitions win elections, they must construct new elite bargains. These bargains require redistributing access to rents to maintain stability. Anti-corruption drives may selectively target opponents while incorporating new coalition members into patronage networks (Khan, 2010).

Empirical evidence from the Buhari administration illustrates this tension. While high-profile investigations and asset recovery initiatives were pursued, critics noted uneven prosecution patterns and limited structural transformation of procurement systems, oil revenue governance and party financing structures (Transparency International, 2022; Page, 2018). The distributive logic of oil rents persisted and elite coalition management remained central to governance. This pattern aligns with rentier state expectations: as long as oil revenue constitutes a primary fiscal base, ruling coalitions will prioritize rent distribution to maintain political order (Ross, 2012). Anti-corruption thus becomes politically instrumental; mobilizing voters, disciplining rivals and legitimizing new coalitions without necessarily transforming the underlying rent-patronage nexus.

Does Regime Change Alter the Patronage Order?

The central analytical question of this article is whether regime change in Nigeria transforms the patronage order or merely reconfigures it. Political settlement theory predicts that elite coalitions adapt rather than collapse when confronted with electoral turnover. Stability requires renegotiation of access to rents, not elimination of distributive structures (Khan, 2010; North et al., 2009). Nigeria's experience supports this expectation.

The 1999 transition from military to civilian rule institutionalized competitive elections but preserved centralized oil control and revenue allocation mechanisms (Suberu, 2001). The 2015

transition redistributed executive authority but maintained fiscal federalism structures, oil dependence and discretionary spending frameworks. Zoning arrangements, federal character principles and party financing networks continued to structure access to office (Omotola, 2010; Joseph, 2014).

What changes, therefore is not the patronage logic but the composition of beneficiaries. Regime alternation produces redistribution within elite networks rather than systemic transformation. From a neo-patrimonial standpoint, personalistic linkages shift to reflect new power holders. From a rentier perspective, the centrality of oil rents constrains reform. From a political settlement perspective, abrupt dismantling of patronage without alternative inclusion mechanisms risks destabilizing elite bargains and provoking conflict.

Recent electoral cycles reinforce this interpretation. Despite growing public demand for governance reform, the fiscal architecture of oil dependency and centralized allocation persists (BudgIT, 2023; Ross, 2012). Institutional reforms such as the Petroleum Industry Act (2021) have sought regulatory restructuring, yet questions remain regarding their capacity to alter entrenched patronage networks.

Thus, regime change in Nigeria has historically produced:

a) Redistribution rather than transformation
b) Coalition reconfiguration rather than institutional rupture
c) Selective accountability rather than systemic overhaul

The patronage order survives because it is structurally embedded in the rent-dependent political settlement. Bringing the three theoretical strands together:

i. Neo-patrimonial theory explains the personalization of public office and the fusion of formal institutions with informal patronage.
ii. Rentier state theory clarifies the fiscal foundation that sustains distributive politics.
iii. Political settlement theory accounts for why elite coalitions resist reforms that threaten their material foundations.

They generate a coherent causal expectation: as long as Nigeria's fiscal structure remains oil-dependent and elite bargains are organized around rent distribution, regime change will not dismantle patronage politics. Instead it will recalibrate it. The Nigerian case therefore challenges linear democratization assumptions that equate electoral alternation with institutional transformation. Regime change alters who controls the patronage system; it rarely transforms the system itself.

Discussion

The persistence of patronage politics across successive regime transitions in Nigeria is neither accidental nor merely a reflection of moral failure. It is structurally embedded in the country's rent-dependent political economy and institutional configuration. When viewed through the combined lenses of neo-patrimonial theory, rentier state theory and political settlement

analysis, regime change appears less as a transformative institutional rupture and more as a recalibration of elite access to state-controlled rents.

Regime Change Without Structural Displacement

The first puzzle addressed in this article concerns why regime change whether through military coups, democratization or electoral alternation has not dismantled entrenched corruption networks. Political settlement theory provides a foundational explanation. Stable political orders in developing contexts are sustained through elite bargains that distribute material resources in ways that prevent violent contestation (Khan, 2010; North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009). These bargains in Nigeria are anchored in access to oil rents and public office.

When regime change occurs, the governing coalition changes composition but not incentive structure. Incoming elites inherit a fiscal architecture that centralizes oil revenue and distributes it through discretionary channels, federal allocations, procurement systems, security votes, appointments and legislative constituency projects. Dismantling these mechanisms would destabilize the very coalition required to govern. Reformist rhetoric often collides with coalition maintenance imperatives. This dynamic helps explain the limited transformative impact of the 1999 democratic transition and the 2015 electoral alternation. Both episodes were accompanied by promises of institutional reform, yet the distributive core of the political system remained intact (Suberu, 2001; LeVan, 2019). From a neo-patrimonial perspective, regime change shifts the network of beneficiaries but leaves the logic of personalized access to state resources largely undisturbed (Erdmann & Engel, 2007).

The Structural Role of Oil Rents

The central structural constraint is Nigeria's oil-dependent fiscal regime. Rentier state theory posits that states heavily reliant on externally generated rents develop weak taxation linkages with citizens, reducing pressures for accountability while increasing competition over control of the state (Beblawi, 1987; Ross, 2012). Nigeria exemplifies this pattern as oil revenues constitute a dominant share of foreign exchange earnings and a substantial portion of government revenue.

Because oil rents accrue centrally and are redistributed politically, the federal state becomes the primary arena for resource allocation. This centralization incentivizes elite competition for access to distributive authority rather than productive economic reform (Watts, 2004; Lewis, 2007). In such a context, corruption is not simply diversion of public funds; it is a mechanism for negotiating access within the elite coalition.

Oil volatility intensifies patronage dependence. During revenue booms, distributive politics expands; during downturns, coalition management becomes more precarious, often resulting in intensified struggles over shrinking rents. The structural reliance on oil therefore locks the political system into a rent-distribution equilibrium. Without fiscal diversification and strengthened domestic taxation, the incentive to maintain patronage networks persists.

Weak Institutional Autonomy and Selective Enforcement

Another explanatory factor lies in institutional autonomy. Anti-corruption agencies, courts, legislatures and oversight bodies formally exist within Nigeria's democratic framework. However their autonomy is constrained by executive dominance, patronage-based appointments and fiscal dependence. Neo-patrimonial scholarship emphasizes the coexistence of formal legal-rational institutions with informal personalized power structures (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Erdmann & Engel, 2007). Anti-corruption institutions in Nigeria such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) have periodically pursued high-profile cases, yet enforcement patterns often reflect political calculations (Page, 2018; Transparency International, 2022). Selective prosecution can reinforce rather than dismantle patronage by disciplining rivals while shielding coalition allies.

Weak institutional insulation from political interference limits the transformative potential of anti-corruption campaigns. Institutional reform requires not only legal frameworks but also protection from elite retaliation. Where ruling coalitions depend on distributive politics for survival, granting full autonomy to oversight bodies would risk exposing coalition members to sanction, thereby destabilizing the political settlement. Thus institutional weakness is not merely administrative incapacity; it is politically rational within the prevailing settlement.

Elite Pact Stability and the Logic of Inclusion

The endurance of patronage networks also reflects the logic of elite inclusion. Nigeria's political history demonstrates the dangers of exclusionary governance, including coups, civil war and regional insurgencies (Osaghae, 1998). In response successive regimes institutionalized mechanisms, federal character principles, zoning arrangements, revenue sharing formulas to incorporate diverse regional and ethnic elites (Suberu, 2001; Joseph, 2014).

These inclusionary mechanisms, while stabilizing, rely heavily on distributive politics. Access to federal appointments, contracts and fiscal allocations functions as compensation for political loyalty and regional incorporation. From a political settlement perspective, patronage is the currency through which elite pacts are maintained (Khan, 2010). Eliminating patronage without constructing alternative forms of inclusion could reopen destabilizing conflicts. Regime change, therefore must navigate the tension between reform and stability. Radical anti-corruption restructuring could fracture elite pacts and generate instability, particularly in a heterogeneous federation with a history of violent contestation. As a result, governing coalitions often prioritize pact stability over systemic reform.

Path Dependence and Institutional Lock-In

The persistence of patronage is further reinforced by path dependence. Institutions created during the military era centralized oil management, discretionary budgeting practices, security vote systems were not dismantled during democratization but rather embedded within the Fourth Republic (Lewis, 2007). Once institutionalized, these practices generate vested interests that resist reform. North et al. (2009) argue that limited access orders maintain

stability by restricting access to political and economic opportunities to elite groups. Nigeria's patronage system resembles such an order: access to lucrative contracts and regulatory advantages is mediated through political connections. Electoral competition may widen participation at the margins, but core access structures remain limited. This over time produces institutional lock-in. Political actors entering the system adapt to its distributive incentives rather than transforming them. Reform-minded leaders confront entrenched networks that extend across party lines, bureaucratic hierarchies and security institutions.

Implications for Democratic Accountability

The cumulative effect of these structural dynamics is a form of democratic continuity without substantive transformation. Electoral turnover enhances procedural legitimacy but does not automatically generate accountability where fiscal dependence on rents persists and institutional autonomy remains constrained. This does not imply that reform is impossible. Rather it suggests that meaningful transformation would require structural shifts: diversification away from oil dependence, strengthened domestic taxation to create accountability linkages, insulation of oversight institutions from executive interference and reconfiguration of elite bargains toward programmatic rather than distributive politics. Until such structural changes occur, regime change in Nigeria is likely to continue producing redistribution within elite networks rather than dismantling the patronage order.

Conclusion

This study has examined the enduring interplay of patronage, corruption and regime change in Nigeria, situating the country within broader African political dynamics. The analysis demonstrates that, contrary to reformist expectations, regime change rarely dismantles patronage networks or fundamentally reduces corruption. Rather, transitions whether through military intervention, democratization or electoral alternation function primarily to reconfigure elite coalitions while preserving the structural logic of rent distribution. Corruption operates as a form of political currency, binding elites together and sustaining coalition stability, while anti-corruption rhetoric serves as a strategic tool for electoral mobilization and legitimizing regime change.

This study contributes to scholarship by integrating neo-patrimonial, rentier state and political settlement frameworks to explain the persistence of patronage politics in resource-dependent contexts. Neo-patrimonial theory illuminates the personalization of authority and the fusion of formal institutions with informal networks; rentier state theory clarifies the fiscal dependence on oil rents as the structural foundation for distributive politics; and political settlement theory explains why elite bargains prioritize coalition stability over institutional transformation.

From a governance perspective, the findings highlight critical implications for democratic consolidation. First institutional weakness and limited autonomy of oversight bodies constrain anti-corruption effectiveness. Secondly is the centrality of oil rents to state revenue structures creates enduring incentives for redistributive patronage, reducing accountability linkages with

the citizenry. Third, the stability of elite pacts maintained through federal character principles, zoning arrangements and discretionary allocations ensures that political transitions reproduce rather than reform the patronage system. These dynamics underscore the difficulty of achieving meaningful democratic consolidation in contexts characterized by rent-dependence and neo-patrimonial governance.

For future research, the study suggests several directions. Comparative analyses across resource-dependent African states could illuminate conditions under which patronage structures are more susceptible to transformation. Longitudinal studies of policy reforms and institutional interventions could assess the extent to which structural changes in fiscal architecture, electoral financing or oversight independence alter the durability of elite networks. Ethnographic and field-based approaches could provide insight into micro-level patron-client interactions and citizen engagement within these systems, complementing the macro-level analysis of institutional and political structures.

Recommendations

a) **Fiscal Diversification and Tax Reform:** Nigeria must reduce structural dependence on oil rents by broadening its tax base and strengthening domestic revenue mobilization. Expanding taxation enhances state–citizen accountability linkages and reduces the centrality of distributive oil politics in sustaining elite coalitions.

b) **Institutional Autonomy and Legal Insulation:** Anti-corruption agencies, the judiciary and oversight institutions require stronger legal and financial independence from executive control. Transparent appointment procedures, secure tenure and independent budgeting mechanisms are essential to prevent selective enforcement and political manipulation.

c) **Reform of Political Financing:** Clear regulation and monitoring of party financing and campaign expenditures should be strengthened to limit the monetization of elections and reduce patron-client inducements that reproduce corrupt networks during regime transitions.

d) **Restructuring Discretionary Allocations:** Greater transparency in security votes, constituency projects and procurement processes is necessary to reduce informal channels of elite redistribution. Digitization and open contracting systems can enhance public scrutiny.

e) **Elite Pact Reconfiguration Toward Programmatic Politics:** Political competition must gradually shift from distributive patronage to programmatic governance. This requires strengthening issue-based party platforms, internal party democracy and civic engagement mechanisms that prioritize policy performance over ethnic or patronage-based mobilization.

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