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Original Article

A Failing State and Society Relations in Nigeria

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Abstract: Nigeria's post-independence optimism has steadily eroded under the weight of political instability, institutional fragility, and socio-economic disparity. Despite having abundant resources and democratic openings, the state has failed to fulfill its basic responsibilities, resulting in widespread distrust and adversarial relations between the state and society. This study examines the persistent governance failures and proposes a tripartite typology of societies, categorized as Cultural, Rule-Based, and Survival-Based, to analyze the dissonance between Nigeria's formal institutions and the everyday survival strategies adopted by citizens. Drawing on empirical indicators and theoretical insights, the paper argues that Nigeria's developmental crisis is rooted not only in weak institutions but also in a hybrid societal logic that combines communal norms, dysfunctional modernity, and survivalist practices. This heuristic offers a nuanced perspective on understanding the complex dynamics that undermine state legitimacy and social cohesion. Ultimately, the study provides an analytical basis for rethinking governance reforms that align institutional structures with the socio-cultural realities of Nigerian society.

Keywords: Governance Failure; Institutional Fragility; Societal Typology; State Legitimacy.



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1. Introduction

The postcolonial era in Africa was marked by a fervent push for independence, driven by the belief that self-governance would restore the continent's dignity and prosperity. In Nigeria, nationalist movements were driven by the conviction that indigenous leadership could replicate the governance systems that existed before colonial rule (Turaki, 2019). However, the post-independence reality revealed a complex governance landscape, influenced by the remnants of colonial administrative structures and the evolving global order shaped by institutions like the Bretton Woods organizations, the United Nations, and Westernization. Nigeria was admonished in the second wave of democracy to be the next in line for development. This admonition was based on the initial optimism regarding the country's resources, leadership prowess, strong social fabric, and vibrant citizens (Mandela, Robinson, 1996). Despite its abundant natural resources, Nigeria has struggled to translate this wealth into sustainable development. The initial optimism of the post-independence period has been overshadowed by persistent challenges, including political instability, corruption, and socio-economic disparities. These issues have eroded public trust in state institutions, questioned the efficacy of the state, the social contract, which is missing, has continued to fuel violence crisis amongst the various ethnic groups, etc., and has led to a societal shift where survival often takes precedence over adherence to formal rules and cultural norms.

The post-independence promise of prosperity and self-determination in Nigeria has steadily given way to a deepening crisis of governance, institutional fragility, and social estrangement. Despite its rich resource wealth and demographic potential, Nigeria continues to underperform across key development indicators. At the heart of this persistent underdevelopment is a profound disconnect between the state's formal institutional architecture and the everyday lived realities of its citizens. The inability of the state to deliver on its basic responsibilities, such as health, security, infrastructure, and economic justice, has rendered the state-society relationship increasingly adversarial, with the state often perceived not as a guarantor of well-being but as a central obstacle to social progress (Olorungbemi, 2019; Akinrinade, 2021). This antagonistic dynamic is starkly reflected in the country's alarming socioeconomic indicators. For instance, Nigeria's death rate stood at 10.83 per 1,000 people in 2024, signifying enduring public health challenges and limited access to quality healthcare (Macrotrends, 2024). Life expectancy remains low at just 56.05 years, a figure far below the global average and indicative of a society where social services have collapsed under the weight of state neglect. The country's power sector continues to hemorrhage economic value, with repeated grid failures costing the economy an estimated \$29 billion annually (Reuters, 2024). More structurally, the nation's infrastructure deficit is projected to rise to \$878 billion within the next 26 years, reflecting decades of underinvestment and fiscal mismanagement (Guardian, 2024). Even more troubling is Nigeria's debt service-to-revenue ratio, which reached 117.6% in Q4 2023, raising questions about the state's fiscal sustainability and severely constraining its ability to invest in long-term development priorities (NISER, 2024).

These empirical indicators highlight a critical pattern: the Nigerian state has not only failed to fulfill its developmental mandate but has also created conditions that compel citizens to rely on informal, extralegal, or even illicit means of survival. This erosion of public trust and legitimacy manifests in the widespread social tolerance of corruption, cyber fraud, transactional sex economies, and other survivalist practices that further weaken the moral and institutional fabric of society (Ikelegbe, 2013; Aborisade & Fayemi, 2015).

Yet, much of the existing literature on Nigeria's political economy tends to approach these challenges either from a purely institutionalist or neoliberal framework, often failing to account for the entanglements of cultural norms, survival logics, and weak enforcement mechanisms. A conceptual gap remains in understanding how formal state institutions, traditional cultural values, and informal strategies of everyday survival interact to shape the nature of society and governance. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that gap by proposing an alternative heuristic: a typology of societies based on their dominant organizing logic, such as cultural, rule-based, and survival-based. This framework offers a fresh lens for examining how Nigerian society simultaneously embodies premodern communalism, modern institutionalism, and a survivalist ethos that challenges both. This paper aims to introduce a tripartite framework that categorizes societies into three types: Cultural, Rule-Based, and Survival-Based. By applying this framework to the Nigerian context, the study seeks to elucidate the underlying factors contributing to the country's developmental challenges and to propose pathways for reordering the state-society relationship towards a more equitable and functional system.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Framework: Three Types of Society

Contemporary analyses of state-society relations in postcolonial Africa often overlook the complex interplay between norms, institutions, and survival logics that shape citizen behavior. To deepen this understanding, this paper introduces a tripartite conceptual typology of societies: Cultural Societies, Rule-Based Societies, and Survival-Based Societies. Each type represents a dominant organizing logic through which individuals and communities relate to authority, structure, and public goods. Although no society fits one type in its pure form, this typology provides a useful lens for explaining how governance patterns manifest differently across various contexts.

2.1.1 Cultural Society

A Cultural Society is primarily governed by inherited values, ancestral traditions, and collective memory. The logic of action in such societies is rooted in long-standing customs, symbolic authority, and communal ties. Legitimacy is derived not from written laws or bureaucratic processes, but from elders, lineage, spirituality, and shared identity. As observed in many precolonial African societies, authority was diffuse, and decision-making was consensus-driven, rooted in what Wiredu (1996) calls "non-party consensual democracy." In cultural societies, legitimacy is moral and historical, rather than legal-rational. Such societies may resist formal bureaucratic rationality, especially when it appears to contradict cultural logic. In the case of Nigeria, colonial and postcolonial governance have often clashed with these deep-seated traditional orders (Mamdani, 1996). Despite the formal existence of state institutions, many Nigerians still rely on traditional rulers, ethnic solidarity, and customary norms to resolve disputes or access services, illustrating the persistence of a cultural society logic.

2.1.2 Rule-Based Society

A Rule-Based Society is characterized by its reliance on formal institutions, codified laws, and impersonal procedures. Governance in such societies is structured around the Weberian ideal type of bureaucracy, where rules and laws, rather than persons or customs, are the main arbiters of conduct (Weber, 1968). The rule of law is central, and accountability mechanisms such as elections, independent judiciaries, and public oversight ensure that both leaders and citizens adhere to established norms. Such societies prioritize predictability, equity, and institutional continuity. For example, Scandinavian and Western European states often exemplify this model, where state capacity, institutional trust, and redistributive mechanisms form the core of public life (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In rule-based societies, corruption is systematically curbed, and state institutions are strong enough to enforce compliance.

2.1.3 Survival-Based Society

A Survival-Based Society emerges where neither cultural nor formal institutional frameworks effectively regulate social life. Here, the primary logic is not tradition or law, but the pursuit of basic survival food, shelter, and safety. In such settings, both the state and traditional institutions are perceived as weak, illegitimate, or absent, leading citizens to prioritize strategies of personal or group survival over civic responsibility or legal obedience. This survivalist logic thrives in contexts of systemic poverty, insecurity, and governance failure. Bayart (1993) refers to such environments as sites of the “politics of the belly,” where public office is instrumentalized for private gain, and informal economies both licit and illicit become the norm. In Nigeria, the normalization of cybercrime (popularly known as “Yahoo Yahoo”), transactional sex, vote buying, and informal militias are not aberrations, but rather rational responses to a collapsed social contract (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Akinyele, 2021). Survival-based societies exhibit high levels of inequality, low institutional trust, and widespread disillusionment with the state. Rule-breaking is not viewed as deviance, but rather as a necessary adaptation. This model thus explains why, despite formal state structures, Nigeria operates largely through informal, survivalist networks that continuously undermine the rule of law and development.

2.2 Theoretical Review

Understanding the divergence between cultural, rule-based, and survival-based societies requires a theoretical lens that accommodates both institutional design and human agency. This section draws on state theory, postcolonial political thought, and sociological frameworks to explain how societies evolve under varying historical and material conditions.

2.2.1 Max Weber and the Typology of Authority

Max Weber's ([1968] 1978) foundational theory of authority provides an essential entry point. Weber identifies three ideal types of legitimate domination: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. Traditional authority aligns with cultural societies, where legitimacy derives from continuity with the past, such as kinship, custom, or ancestral rulership. Legal-rational authority, on the other hand, reflects rule-based societies, in which laws are impersonal and binding regardless of who enacts them. Nigeria's formal state apparatus aspires to this legal-rational model, but in practice often operates under a mixture of traditional authority and informal clientelism. This theoretical lens helps illuminate the uneven coexistence of modern institutions with premodern loyalties in Nigeria and similar postcolonial states, a phenomenon Mamdani (1996) refers to as “bifurcated statehood,” where the urban civic space is governed by law, but the rural periphery remains under indirect rule-like conditions rooted in custom and ethnicity.

2.2.2 Joel Migdal and the “Strong Societies, Weak States” Thesis

Joel Migdal's (1988) “state-in-society” approach is critical for analyzing survival-based societies. Migdal argues that in many postcolonial contexts, the state competes with other social organizations, ethnic networks, religious authorities, warlords, and informal traders for control over people's behavior. These non-state actors may prove more legitimate or effective than the state, especially when the state is predatory, corrupt, or absent. In such contexts, society develops its own adaptive systems for survival, often outside or in defiance of formal legal norms. This model aligns with Nigeria's trajectory, where informal networks and alternative institutions often hold more relevance than the state in shaping people's everyday lives. The normalization of informal economies, corruption, and extrajudicial solutions reflects what Migdal calls a fragmented social control system, where different actors exert partial authority over overlapping territories and populations.

2.2.3 Social Contract Theory and Its Breakdown

Finally, the logic of social contract theory, particularly as conceptualized by Rousseau (1762) and Hobbes (1651), helps frame the relationship between state failure and survivalist behavior. In classical theory, citizens cede some freedoms in exchange for security and order provided by the state. Where the state fails to fulfill this bargain, citizens have no moral obligation to obey, thus reverting to a “state of nature,” where survival, rather than legality, becomes the highest good. In Nigeria, the near-total absence of public goods and security has eroded the legitimacy of the social contract. Citizens who feel betrayed by the state see survival-based rule-breaking, such as tax evasion, illegal migration, vote selling, or internet fraud, not as deviance, but as necessary resistance (Ekeh, 1975; Olukoshi, 2011). The result is a moral economy of illegality, where informal practices are not just tolerated but valorized.

2.3 Empirical Review

The Nigerian state presents a complex paradox: endowed with vast human and material resources, yet persistently characterized by poor governance outcomes, weakened institutions, and deteriorating public trust. Empirical studies over the past two decades have increasingly focused attention on this contradiction, documenting how structural dysfunctions, fiscal vulnerabilities, and informal survival strategies undermine the functionality of the Nigerian state and distort its developmental agenda. Historically, Nigeria’s pre-colonial communities operated largely as cultural societies, with governance rooted in tradition and kinship. Post-independence attempts to transition into a rule-based society were undermined by elite capture, military authoritarianism, and uneven state penetration. In recent decades, a survival-based order has emerged, characterized by informal economies that dominate, weak public trust in institutions, and the socially rationalization of illegality. The glorification of cybercrime (“Yahoo boys”), systemic administrative corruption, and the normalization of transactional politics reflect this shift.

One dominant empirical theme is the informalisation of governance and public life. Meagher (2010) notes that in many Nigerian cities, informal actors, including market associations, religious bodies, vigilante groups, and ethnic unions, have assumed governance roles once reserved for the state. This phenomenon arises not solely from cultural resilience but from the state’s long-standing inability to provide basic infrastructure, security, and economic opportunities. These informal networks do not merely coexist with formal institutions; they often supersede them in terms of legitimacy and effectiveness at the grassroots level. The emergence of what Bayart (1993) once described as “rhizomic” power relations in African polities, where overlapping, informal authority systems operate beneath the surface of the official state, is especially visible in Nigeria.

At the heart of this informalisation is the deepening crisis of political governance and state legitimacy. Empirical indicators paint a grim picture. Nigeria’s ranking on the 2023 Fragile States Index (FSI) places its 14th globally, with particularly high vulnerability in areas of “factionalized elites,” “group grievance,” “public services,” and “economic decline” (Fund for Peace, 2023). These indicators reflect a steady erosion of institutional cohesion and a public perception that state actors are both ineffective and self-serving. Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (2023) further reinforces this trend, ranking Nigeria 145 out of 180 countries. The pervasiveness of corruption and rent-seeking at the political center has led to a culture of impunity, where state resources are mobilized not for public service but for the consolidation of elite interests.

Equally important is the financial distress experienced by the Nigerian state. Fiscal sustainability has become a recurring concern among scholars and policymakers. Recent reports from the Debt Management Office (DMO) indicate that Nigeria’s debt service-to-revenue ratio stood at 117.6% by Q4 2023, suggesting that the federal government spends more than it earns to service its debts (BudgIT, 2024). This growing debt burden has reduced fiscal space for investment in health, education, and infrastructure, core public goods necessary for long-term development. Infrastructure remains especially underfunded, with the AfDB (2023) estimating Nigeria’s infrastructure deficit at over \$878 billion if it hopes to achieve its national development targets by 2050. In practical terms, power grid collapses numbering over ten incidents in 2023 alone have translated to an estimated \$29 billion in annual economic losses (World Bank, 2023). These figures indicate that governance failure is not merely administrative; it is existential, with tangible costs for growth, inclusion, and social cohesion.

The empirical consequences of this fragility are borne most heavily by ordinary Nigerians. The National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reports that approximately 63% of the population, or around 133 million people, live in multidimensional poverty. Life expectancy remains low at 56.05 years as of 2024, while youth unemployment hovers above 53%. In this context, survival becomes the dominant logic of existence, displacing loyalty to rules, laws, or even collective values. Numerous studies have examined how this logic manifests in forms of deviant entrepreneurship, particularly among young people. Okonkwo and Nweke (2021) explain how cybercrime, popularly known as “Yahoo Yahoo,” has emerged as a rational adaptation to exclusion, not simply a moral lapse. In a society where merit is often unrewarded and institutions are perceived as compromised, the informal and illicit economy offers not only financial gain but also social mobility and a sense of identity.

Beyond economic explanations, cultural and ethno-regional dynamics have also been empirically shown to influence governance and state performance. Mustapha (2006) and Suberu (2015) both note that Nigeria’s political behavior is still deeply shaped by ethnic identities and cultural loyalties. These loyalties often override the logic of rule-

based citizenship, reinforcing what Ekeh (1975) famously referred to as the “two publics”: the civic (colonial-modern) and the primordial (cultural-traditional). Elections are less about policies and more about ethno-regional patronage, contributing to weak accountability and governance paralysis. This has consequences for national integration, redistribution, and the legitimacy of formal democratic processes.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that Nigeria’s governance failure is not simply a matter of leadership failure or institutional weakness in isolation. It is about the interaction between rule-based structures, deep-seated cultural logics, and a survivalist ethic shaped by chronic deprivation. This layered complexity is often overlooked in conventional governance literature, which tends to treat institutional decay as a linear process. In contrast, the framework proposed in this paper, which distinguishes between cultural, rule-based, and survival-based societies, offers a more dynamic understanding of Nigeria’s political and socio-economic dysfunction. It captures the simultaneity of formal institutions and informal realities, as well as the tensions that emerge when societies are governed by systems misaligned with their survival needs and cultural dispositions.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to explore the interaction between cultural norms, formal governance structures, and survivalist behavior in Nigeria’s socio-political economy. Recognizing the complexity of Nigeria’s state-society dynamics, the research draws on primary data collected through structured questionnaires and direct observation, as well as secondary data obtained from panel datasets spanning the period from 2015 to 2024. The survey component was administered to a sample of 300 respondents across three strategically selected urban and peri-urban regions: Abuja (Federal Capital Territory), Ibadan (South-West), and Kano (North-West), capturing regional diversity in governance experiences and socio-economic responses. A stratified and purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness among civil servants, informal sector operators, unemployed youth, students, and traders, thereby reflecting the varied class and occupational profiles shaping societal responses to governance. The questionnaire items, structured on a five-point Likert scale, probed key themes such as trust in state institutions, access to public services, perceptions of equity, and informal coping strategies. To complement these responses, participant observation was conducted in public service institutions, markets, and transport hubs to gain unstructured but insightful impressions of survival behaviors, informal rule enforcement, and the operational presence or absence of the state in everyday life.

These field observations were captured in systematic field notes and coded thematically. Secondary data, drawn from sources such as the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), World Bank, and Afrobarometer, were deployed to assess macro-governance indicators, including Nigeria’s public debt-to-GDP ratio, debt service-to-revenue ratio, education and health sector budgetary allocations, the corruption perception index, multidimensional poverty index, and average life expectancy. These datasets facilitated longitudinal analysis of Nigeria’s governance and fiscal performance over a decade. Statistical analyses were performed using STATA 17, with fixed and random effects models applied to examine trends in institutional and fiscal stability over time. The primary data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression techniques to assess the relationship between institutional trust and dependence on informal systems. Meanwhile, qualitative data from observation and open-ended questionnaire responses were thematically analyzed using NVivo. Ethical considerations were strictly observed; informed consent was obtained from all participants, data confidentiality was ensured, and ethical clearance was granted by the host institution’s review board. This multi-pronged methodology provides a robust foundation for examining the institutional and informal undercurrents that shape governance, survival, and the social contract in Nigeria.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Underlying Factors in Shaping Nigeria’s Sociopolitical and Economic Identity

The first objective of this study was to examine the underlying factors that shape Nigeria’s sociopolitical and economic identity as a survival-based society. The survey explored this through a set of Likert-scale questions addressing three core domains: (1) institutional failure and legality, (2) cultural and normative foundations, and (3) the breakdown or absence of the social contract. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements designed to assess the extent to which Nigerian society is governed by formal laws or by survivalist instincts. The responses reveal a consistent pattern: a significant proportion of the population views the Nigerian state as one where formal institutions exist primarily in theory but are routinely undermined in practice. The results of the analysis as presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Result of Descriptive Statistics Analysis

Item	Strongly Dis-agree	Disa-gree	Neu-tral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Institutional Failure and Legality					
Laws exist but are not enforced unless one has power or money	14	20	53	160	153
Government institutions are unable to deliver basic public goods	16	25	60	152	147
I trust state institutions to act in the public interest	120	100	80	60	40
Cultural and Normative Foundations					
Nigeria operates more by informal norms than formal rules	8	18	47	180	146
Cultural patterns justify informal or extralegal survival strategies	21	29	90	132	128
In Nigeria, informal networks are more effective than government structures	18	24	64	140	154
Breakdown or Absence of the Social Contract					
The crisis in Nigeria stems from a broken social contract	12	24	86	156	122
Survival activities are normalized due to a lack of alternatives	12	21	56	172	139
Citizens obey laws because they reflect our shared values	100	80	100	80	40

Table 1 captures that 78.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “In Nigeria, laws exist but are often not enforced unless one has power or money,” indicating widespread disillusionment with the state’s regulatory and enforcement apparatus. When asked whether Nigeria operates more by informal norms and individual discretion than by formal rules, 81.6% of participants agreed or strongly agreed. This lends support to the conceptual framing of Nigeria as a “survival-based society”, where individuals prioritize immediate livelihood concerns over legality, largely because the formal system offers minimal protection or support. Furthermore, 73.1% of respondents affirmed that survival often justifies breaking formal rules, especially in urban and informal economic sectors. For instance, over half of the traders interviewed during observation sessions admitted to regularly evading levies or licensing procedures as a necessary tactic to avoid state harassment or unnecessary delay.

In probing the causes of this condition, 69.4% of respondents agreed that Nigeria’s current crisis stems from a broken social contract, one in which the state has consistently failed to deliver public goods such as security, education, infrastructure, and healthcare. An equally high number, 71.2%, argued that citizens no longer feel morally obligated to obey the state because the state itself does not act in the public interest. These perceptions confirm Omitola’s (2017) argument that state illegitimacy in Nigeria is not simply a governance failure, but a deep societal fracture in the expected reciprocity between citizens and institutions. To probe the cultural dimension, a substantial number, 64.9% of respondents, believed that Nigeria’s survivalist orientation is also culturally embedded. That is, historical precedents of informal problem-solving, community reliance, and patronage systems continue to shape behavior more than formal laws. This aligns with Apter’s (1999) observation that many postcolonial African societies retain strong “cultural logics” that operate parallel to legalistic state norms.

The effect of this reality is pronounced. When asked whether societal tolerance of illegal but profitable survival activities (e.g., internet fraud, rent-seeking, bribery, and informal vending) contributes to state collapse, 82.5% agreed or strongly agreed. Additionally, 77.8% believed that such activities have become normalized due to a lack of credible alternatives. This confirms the thesis of this paper that Nigeria’s current predicament is not merely legal or economic, but structurally survivalist, a self-reinforcing system where state weakness fuels informal responses, which in turn weaken the state further.

Observational data corroborates these trends. In Ibadan and Kano markets, for example, traders and commuters routinely bypass regulatory processes, not due to ignorance, but because they believe the rules are either unjust, exploitable, or selectively enforced. This informal order, sustained by necessity and reinforced by collective practice, is emblematic of a society operating in a state of survival rather than under the rule of law. In summary, the questionnaire results indicate that Nigeria is widely perceived not as a functioning, rule-based society, but as a deeply survivalist one, shaped by state failure, weak enforcement, cultural informality, and a broken social contract. These findings lay the empirical foundation for deeper thematic interpretation in subsequent sections.

4.2. Discussion of Findings

The findings from the field survey reveal a profound disjunction between the state and society in Nigeria, reflecting the hallmarks of what this study defines as a survival-based society. The evidence suggests that Nigeria's sociopolitical order is not primarily guided by legality or cultural coherence, but rather by informal survival strategies that routinely undermine state authority, the rule of law, and long-term development.

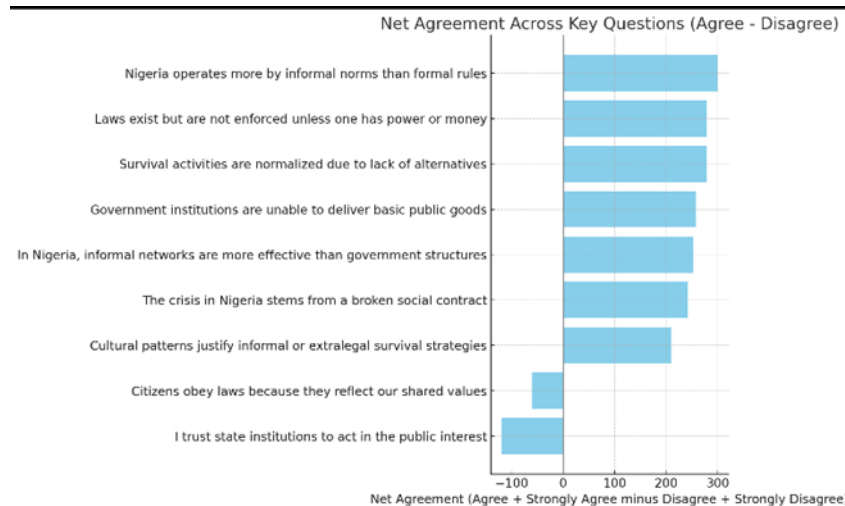


Figure 1. Graphical Presentation of Respondents Perception

4.2.1. Institutional Failure and Legality

A striking 78.3% of respondents agreed that laws are largely enforced only when individuals have power or money, with similarly high agreement (74.8%) that state institutions cannot provide basic services. More than half (55%) express mistrust in the capacity of public institutions to act in the national interest. These findings resonate with earlier analyses by Rotberg (2004), who describes failing states as those where institutional legitimacy collapses due to non-performance, especially in service delivery. Nigeria's high corruption index score of 24/100 in 2023 (Transparency International, 2024) and the ongoing challenge of selective law enforcement confirm this institutional malaise. Fiscal mismanagement exacerbates the problem. The debt service-to-revenue ratio of 117.6% in Q4 2023 (CBN, 2024) indicates a structurally unsustainable state, hindering its ability to invest in public goods. Simultaneously, the annual \$29 billion loss from power sector failures (PwC, 2023) highlights systemic institutional dysfunction, which prevents the realization of rule-based development.

4.2.2. Cultural and Normative Foundations

Roughly 81.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Nigeria operates more by informal norms than formal laws. The entrenchment of patron-client networks, kinship loyalties, and religious identities in daily governance reflects a cultural substructure that overrides legal-rational authority. According to Chabal and Daloz (1999), such informalism reflects the politicization of disorder, where elite actors exploit cultural legitimacy to sustain predatory governance. Indeed, 64.9% of respondents believe that cultural patterns justify extralegal survival strategies, such as bribery, informal security arrangements, and political godfatherism. In many communities, local vigilante groups or traditional rulers often command more legitimacy than formal state authorities, further highlighting the disconnect between the legal and normative orders.

4.2.3. Breakdown of the Social Contract

71.5% of respondents attribute Nigeria's governance crisis to a broken or absent social contract. This finding validates Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thesis that when a social contract is not mutually honored, the legitimacy of the state collapses. Respondents highlighted how citizens no longer view the state as a guarantor of their welfare. This is further evidenced by the low life expectancy of 56.05 years (World Bank, 2024), rampant poverty (40.1% of Nigerians live below the poverty line as of 2023), and an infrastructure deficit projected to exceed \$878 billion by 2050 (AfDB, 2023). Moreover, 77.8% of respondents agree that survival activities often illegal are normalized due to a lack of viable alternatives. From petty corruption and prostitution to cyber fraud (popularly known as "Yahoo Yahoo"), these activities have become embedded as adaptive responses to structural economic exclusion. Nwagwu and Oni (2021) explain this shift as a moral recalibration, where citizens come to see extralegal actions not as deviance but as necessity.

Interestingly, only 30% of respondents believe citizens obey laws because they reflect shared values. This finding sharply contradicts the normative assumptions about democratic governance, which suggest that legitimacy should stem from consensus and value alignment. The preceding survey results highlight a concerning pattern of institutional fragility, weakened governance, and the normalization of survivalist behaviors within Nigerian society. This is further reinforced by macro-level indicators presented in the panel data below, which together offer a panoramic view of Nigeria's deteriorating sociopolitical and economic landscape between 2019 and 2024.

Table 2. Socioeconomic and Governance Indicators in Nigeria (2019–2024)

Year	Death Rate 1 (per 1,000)	Infrastructure Deficit 2 (\$ Bil-lion est.)	Power Losses 3 (\$ Bil-lion/yr)	Inflation Rate 4 (%)
2019	11.39	100	25	11.4
2020	11.18	120	26	12.9
2021	11.01	160	27	15.6
2022	10.89	200	28	18.8
2023	10.84	240	29	21.9
2024	10.83	300	29	33.2

Table 2. Socioeconomic and Governance Indicators in Nigeria (2019–2024) – Cont'd

Year	Unemployment 5 (%)	Interest Rate 6 (MPR %)	Corruption Index 7 (Score/100)	Insecurity Deaths 8 (Approx.)
2019	23.1	13.5	26	7,000
2020	27.1	11.5	25	9,800
2021	33.3	11.5	24	10,000
2022	37.2	13.0	24	12,000
2023	40.6	18.5	24	12,800
2024	41.8	24.75	24	14,000

Source: Researcher's compilation from World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI); Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG); Infrastructure Concession Regulatory Commission; PwC (2021), Nigerian Economic Outlook; National Bureau of Statistics (NBS); Central Bank of Nigeria; Transparency International; SBM Intelligence; and Nigeria Security Tracker, CFR.

Table 2 illustrates a multidimensional crisis. The steadily high death rate, despite a marginal decline, reflects persistent health sector challenges. The massive and widening infrastructure gap estimated to reach \$300 billion by 2024 illustrates the chronic underinvestment in essential public goods (NESG, 2023). Similarly, Nigeria's national power grid losses, valued at \$29 billion annually, point to a structural economic hemorrhage (PwC, 2021). These significant deficits translate into rising inflation and unemployment, which reached 33.2% and 41.8%, respectively, in 2024 (NBS, 2024), fueling a desperate turn to informal or illicit economies. Insecurity remains one of the clearest symptoms of state incapacity. By 2024, over 14,000 insecurity-related deaths were recorded, with over 3,600 abductions reported in the previous year alone (SBM Intelligence, 2024). These figures are not just statistics; they reflect the de facto absence of the state in many parts of the country. Public confidence in government has plunged, with Afrobarometer (2022) indicating that fewer than 40% of Nigerians trust elected officials or public institutions. This erosion of trust compounds the breakdown of the social contract, where citizens no longer see the state as a provider of protection or welfare, but rather as a distant or even predatory actor.

As formal systems falter, informal survival strategies become normalized. Youth unemployment at 53.4% in 2024 has pushed many into illegal migration, cybercrime, transactional sex work, and patronage politics (NBS, 2024). The state's failure to address this crisis has generated what Bayart (1993) once termed a "politics of the belly," where elites and citizens alike exploit public institutions for survival rather than for development. Taken together, this evidence reinforces the core thesis of this paper: Nigeria increasingly resembles a survival-based society, where laws exist but lack enforceability, and where state legitimacy is persistently undermined by structural incapacity, economic exclusion, and insecurity. The country thus functions in a dual reality, characterized by formal legality and informal necessity, where survival often supersedes lawfulness, and where citizens negotiate their daily existence through networks and norms that operate outside the state.

5. Conclusions

This study concludes that Nigeria's precarious condition is not incidental but the cumulative outcome of historically embedded colonial distortions and the persistent failure of post-independence leadership to correct them. The decay of societal order and the dominance of survivalist behaviors are symptomatic of a state that has lost its normative and

functional authority. The Nigerian state, weakened by corruption, political misgovernance, and a deepening legitimacy crisis, has been unable to fulfill its end of the social contract, namely, providing security, justice, welfare, and opportunities. As formal institutions become increasingly hollow, citizens often resort to informal systems that frequently conflict with the law. This has led to the emergence of a dual society: one that retains the formal trappings of statehood but is governed, in practice, by norms of improvisation, distrust, and self-preservation. Without a fundamental rethinking of state-society relations grounded in justice, equity, and institutional reform, Nigeria risks further descent into fragility and societal fragmentation.

5.1. Implications for Political Development

The typology advanced in this study underscores the profound limitations of transplanting institutional models into societies lacking the requisite social legitimacy. Rule-based reforms, no matter how technically sound, often falter in environments where survivalist logics define everyday life. In such contexts, formal institutions are frequently bypassed or co-opted by informal structures rooted in necessity, distrust, and marginalisation. As such, political development strategies must go beyond strengthening state capacity in the narrow sense of bureaucratic efficiency or legal enforcement. They must engage directly with the lived experiences and normative frameworks of the populace. This includes addressing chronic poverty, systemic insecurity, and the embedded informal moral economies that shape behaviour and expectations. Understanding whether a society functions primarily on cultural, rule-based, or survivalist principles is not an academic exercise, but it is essential for designing governance systems that are contextually grounded, socially resonant, and politically sustainable. Without this alignment, reforms risk becoming mere formalities, disconnected from the complex realities they are intended to transform.

5.2. Recommendations

1. **Rebuild the Social Contract through Inclusive Governance** - The Nigerian state must undertake deliberate efforts to restore public trust by fulfilling its basic obligations: security, welfare, justice, and economic opportunity. This requires transparent governance, citizen participation, and equitable policy design that reflects local realities (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004).
2. **Institutional Reform and Rule of Law** - Strengthening the independence, capacity, and accountability of key institutions such as the judiciary, anti-corruption bodies, and law enforcement agencies is central to rebuilding legal order. Rule-based governance cannot thrive where institutions are politicized or non-functional (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).
3. **Invest in Human Capital and Infrastructure** - A survival-based society emerges where people lack access to basic services. Government must prioritise investments in education, healthcare, and critical infrastructure that improve the standard of living and reduce dependence on informal and illicit economies (World Bank, 2023).
4. **Address Cultural and Normative Misalignments** - Governance reforms must engage with deeply rooted cultural logics that shape behavior. Community-based civic education, leadership accountability at the grassroots, and localised legal literacy campaigns should be employed to shift societal norms toward legality and public interest.
5. **Targeted Security Sector Reform** - The failure of state capacity is most visible in insecurity. The security architecture must be restructured to be more community-responsive, intelligence-driven, and locally accountable. Insecurity breeds informality and distrust, and addressing it is foundational to reversing societal decay.
6. **Fiscal and Administrative Decentralisation** - Power must be devolved in a manner that aligns resources with responsibilities. A more decentralised governance structure that empowers states and local governments can facilitate tailored development and reduce the disconnect between state authority and citizens' lived realities (Suberu, 2001).
7. **Support for Informal Sector Formalisation** - Rather than criminalising survivalist economic activities, the government should create regulatory and financial pathways for informal actors to transition into the formal economy through microcredit access, legal recognition, and regulatory reforms.

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