

# Tenets Of Democracy and the Spectre Of State Capture In Nigeria

*Dr. Azowue O. Emmanuel*

**A**dvancing support for your successor is not enough to expect slave-tailored loyalty

Things usually fall apart when an individual advances his personal interest over the interest of the entity of a group of people. A strong constitutional framework promoting fundamental democratic principles coexists with the ubiquitous reality of state capture in Nigeria, which has been a significant paradox throughout the country's democratic journey since civilian government was restored in 1999. While popular sovereignty, political participation, the rule of law, and accountability are the official pillars upon which Nigeria's democracy rests, this essay contends that a shadow governance system allows influential private interests to exploit public institutions for their own benefit, thus undermining these principles. There is no greater danger to the consolidation of democracy and developmental progress in Nigeria than this state capture dynamic.

A thorough articulation of the formal principles of democracy in Nigeria is available. As stated in the Constitution of 1999, "We the people" have the power to assert their sovereignty through holding fair and frequent elections. Thanks to its renowned free press, robust civil society, and multi-party system, citizens are able to actively participate in politics. According to the rule of law idea, the state, like all other individuals and organizations, must be held to account by the law. Additionally, in order to maintain accountability and openness in government, the constitution establishes a division of powers among the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches. These principles form the basis of Nigeria's democratic experience.

But in reality, the long-standing problem of state capture undermines these foundations. State capture is more than just corruption; it describes a systemic situation in which a small group of powerful people—political oligarchs, corporate tycoons, high-ranking military officials, and even multinational interests—co-opt important institutions to influence policymaking and legislation for their personal gain. Several ways are this made apparent. Many times, the electoral process—the principal tool for exercising popular sovereignty—is tampered with. The effect of illicit funding, vote-buying, and the weaponization of incumbency can transform elections from expressions of popular will into transactions that reinforce patronage networks. Participation and responsibility are essentially weakened by this.

Second, patronage often undermines the separation of powers. The rule of law is threatened when the court is swayed by nominations, threats, or corruption, and when the legislature, which is supposed to be an impartial check, is neutralized by "chairmanship" appointments and financial bribes. Historical difficulties in preserving true autonomy have caused the efficacy of key accountability bodies, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), to fluctuate with political winds.

When it comes to public policy and the distribution of resources, state capture is the worst. When governmental institutions are captured, public goods are squandered and private rents are increased. The capturing network benefits from a lopsided distribution of national funds, oil profits, and public contracts. This clarifies the ongoing conundrum of having abundant natural resources but also terrible infrastructure, healthcare, and educational opportunities. The

democratic principle that government should serve the collective interest is blatantly disregarded as policies are crafted with the goal of enriching the ruling class at the expense of the nation's progress.

There will be far-reaching effects. First, it causes people to lose faith in democracy. Citizens lose faith in the democratic compact, civic involvement declines, and voter apathy increases when they view the state as a tool for predation instead of service. The 2020 #EndSARS protests exemplify how this disenchantment fosters societal unrest; the demonstrations were primarily against police brutality but also sounded a larger cry against a captive and unresponsive institution. Secondly, the principal cause of Nigeria's lack of progress in development is state capture. This faulty incentive system hinders economic growth and keeps people in poverty because it encourages rent-seeking and graft rather than innovation and productivity.

Democracy in Nigeria, however, shows a tough but resolute ability to defend itself. Tools for resistance are provided by the



very principles that are being attacked. Consistently, a free press and civil society work to uncover high-level corruption and push for reform. In rare instances, the court has issued seminal rulings that limit executive overreach, even while it is under constant pressure to do otherwise. Despite its flaws, the federal structure does provide opportunities for subnational authorities to test out new approaches to government. Under addition, unlike under blatantly authoritarian governments, the public is compelled to respond to some extent by the intensity of electoral competition, flaws and all.

There is a delicate balance in Nigerian democracy between the principles outlined in the constitution and the practice of state capture. The formal principles are not dormant; rather, they are the subject of heated debate. In order to secure a democratic future for Nigeria, the country must fight to free itself from the grip of the private sector and restore public trust in its institutions. This calls for structural changes in political funding, electoral integrity, judicial independence, and citizen empowerment; it goes beyond anti-corruption campaigns. The great principles of Nigerian democracy will continue to be an unfulfilled promise and unrealized potential for many of its citizens until the capture networks are completely dismantled. Success in this critical conflict will determine the fate and development of the biggest democracy in Africa. Until then, there was indeed a country!