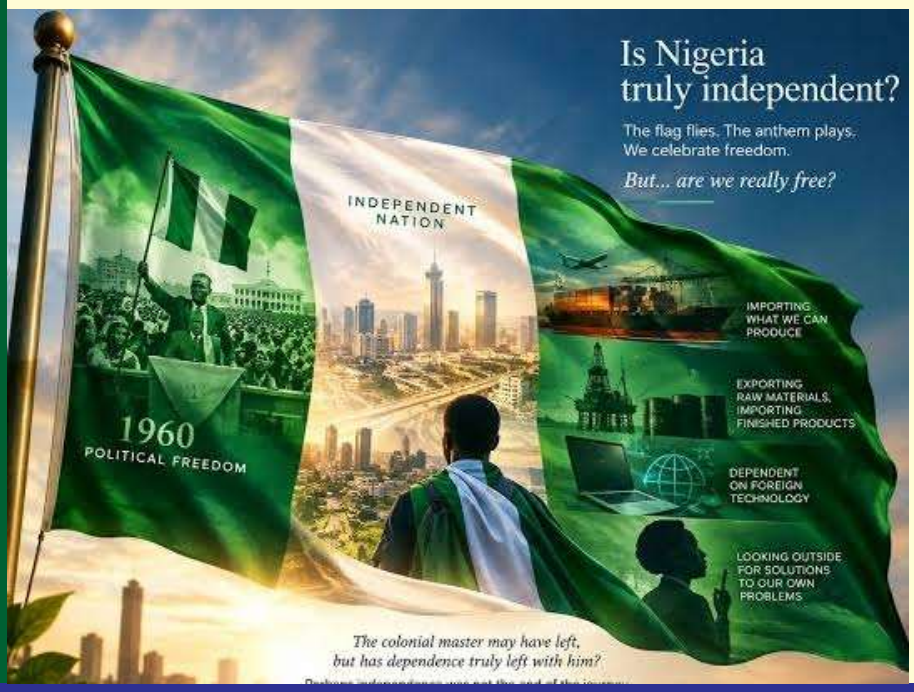
How truly Independent are we as A Nation?

By Ozumi Abdul

At 66, Nigeria is old enough to remember the excitement of freedom but paradoxically young enough to still be searching for the meaning of it. Every October 1, the flag rises, the anthem plays and the country remembers the night the Union Jack came down. Yet somewhere beyond the ceremonies, another Nigeria wakes up to a different Independence Day: the graduate refreshing a foreign visa portal, the doctor preparing examination papers for a hospital thousands of kilometers away, the family calculating the cost of sending a child abroad, the farmer afraid to travel to his field and the worker watching the price of food rise faster than his salary. The country is free, but freedom has not always translated into security, prosperity or opportunity. There is something worrying about a nation whose brightest young people increasingly describe departure as a plan rather than a dream. The word Japa has moved from slang into the vocabulary of a generation. It is popular in university hostels, discussed in hospitals, debated in offices and joked about at family gatherings. For some, leaving is an adventure; for others, it is an escape from unemployment, insecurity, failing infrastructure, weak public services and the fear that years of education may still produce no decent livelihood. The irony is difficult to miss: a country that fought to control its own destiny is watching some of the people meant to build that destiny pack their certificates into suitcases.

And beneath the noise of political campaigns, Independence Day speeches and patriotic songs lies a more uncomfortable picture. Nigeria has enormous oil and gas reserves, fertile land, a huge youthful population, world-class entrepreneurs and a creative industry that commands attention far beyond its borders. Yet millions remain trapped in poverty; millions of children are outside school; electricity remains unreliable or unavailable to a large share of the population; insecurity has made movement and economic activity dangerous in parts of the country; and institutions that should protect citizens continue to struggle with questions of corruption, accountability and public confidence.

The Union Jack may have disappeared from Nigeria's flagpole 66 years ago, but there is a harder question rhetorically begging for an answer: what kind of independence has Nigeria built for the people who inherited it? Nigeria's independence was a political achievement. The challenge at 66 is economic and institutional independence: the ability to create opportunities, protect citizens, educate children, retain talent, enforce laws and make public institutions work without citizens having to escape the system to find a better life. The economy provides the first major test. Nigeria is not a poor country in natural resources, population or economic potential. Yet prosperity per person remains weak. World Bank data show Nigeria's inflation was 23.0 percent in 2025, while personal remittances received were equivalent to 7.8 percent of GDP. Remittances demonstrate the strength of Nigerians abroad, but their scale also reflects how deeply households depend on earnings generated outside the country. Nigeria is also becoming larger faster than its institutions are becoming capable. World Bank data put the population at 237.5 million in 2025, with annual population growth of 2.1 percent. That means every weakness in education, healthcare, housing, jobs and security is multiplied by demographic pressure. Meanwhile, oil remains central to public finance: World Bank analysis shows oil and gas revenues contributed N14.6 trillion to FAAC gross revenues in 2025, alongside N22.9 trillion from non-oil and gas sources. The figures show both change and continuity. Nigeria is diversifying its revenue base, but petroleum still matters heavily to the federation's finances, making economic independence inseparable from the country's ability to build a productive economy beyond crude exports and reduce vulnerability to global commodity prices, production shocks and external financing conditions over time.



The World Bank estimates that 69.6 percent of Nigerians lived below the lower-middle-income poverty line of $4.20 a day in 2025, while 50.8 percent, about 123 million people, lived in extreme poverty. At the same time, the Bank says the economy has been growing and macroeconomic stability has improved following reforms. In the first half of 2025, GDP expanded by 3.9 percent year on year, compared with 3.5 percent in the same period of 2024. The contradiction is important: an economy can grow while millions remain unable to feel the improvement. If national output rises but household purchasing power, food security and access to basic services remain weak, the headline growth rate tells only part of the story. The World Bank reported that the cost of a basic food basket rose fivefold between 2019 and 2024, while poor households can spend as much as 70 percent of their income on food. Economic sovereignty is therefore

not simply about the size of GDP; it is also about whether citizens can afford the economy they live in.

Electricity is another uncomfortable measure of self-reliance. World Bank data show that only 62.5 percent of Nigeria's population had access to electricity in 2024, compared with a global average of 91.9 percent. A country that has spent decades earning oil revenues but still leaves a large share of its population without reliable access to electricity faces a basic development contradiction. Electricity affects schools, hospitals, factories, small businesses, digital work and household income. Without dependable power, independence remains incomplete in practical terms. Human capital may be the deepest test. Nigeria has one of the world's youngest and largest populations, but the country is not converting that demographic advantage fast enough into skills and productivity. The World Bank's 2026 HCI+ assessment gave Nigeria an overall score of 131, above the Sub-Saharan African average of 127, but its education pillar stood at 64, compared with 88 for the median lower-middle-income country. Tertiary completion was 11.3 percent, against 17.6 percent for lower-middle-income countries.

The education crisis begins long before university. UNICEF reported in 2024 that 10.2 million Nigerian children of primary-school age and another 8.1 million of junior-secondary age were out of school. It also reported that 74 percent of children aged seven to 14 lacked basic reading and mathematics skills. In 2025, UNICEF's annual report put the number of out-of-school children at 10.2 million and said 54 percent of Nigerian children aged zero to 17 lived in multidimensional poverty. A nation cannot claim full independence while millions of children are effectively excluded from the knowledge economy. Health tells a similar story. UNICEF's 2025 figures say one in nine Nigerian children dies before reaching age five, about one in 100 mothers dies during pregnancy or childbirth, and Nigeria has 2.2 million zero-dose children, the highest number globally. Japa therefore should not be treated merely as a social-media trend. It is also a labour-market signal. WHO reported that 9,642 nurses and midwives who received their training in Nigeria joined the UK register between March 2021 and March 2024, accounting for 56.1 percent of all joiners from countries on the WHO safeguards list during that period. The Nigerian government responded by approving a National Health Workforce Migration Policy in 2024. The policy itself is evidence that workforce migration had become a national policy concern.

Security presents an even more fundamental question: what is freedom worth if citizens cannot safely travel, farm, trade or sleep? ACLED describes Nigeria as facing Islamist insurgency, armed banditry, kidnapping, communal conflict, cult violence and political militias. Its Nigeria profile, updated in September 2026, says the country's kidnapping crisis has continued beyond its 2025 peak. The organization's data platform tracks violence through incidents, fatalities and civilian exposure, showing that insecurity is not a single northern problem but a national governance challenge.

Democracy has also become a question of participation rather than simply elections. Nigeria has maintained civilian rule since 1999, an important achievement after decades of military intervention. Yet the depth of democratic participation remains troubling. INEC says 93,469,008 voters were registered for the 2023 general election, while electoral observers recorded turnout of roughly 27 percent. The Electoral Hub described the 2023 presidential turnout as the lowest in Nigeria's democratic history. A democracy in which the majority of registered voters stay away from the polls deserves examination, even without assuming why each citizen abstained.

Freedom House's 2025 assessment classified Nigeria as "Partly Free," scoring it 44 out of 100, with 20 points for political rights and 24 for civil liberties. The organization said elections had improved in some respects since 1999 but continued to face irregularities, while insecurity, corruption and abuses by security agencies threatened rights.

The judiciary provides another test of independence. The World Justice Project's 2025 Rule of Law Index ranked Nigeria 120th out of 143 countries, with an overall score of 0.41. Nigeria's score actually increased slightly during the year, meaning the data do not support a simple claim of across-the-board deterioration. Yet the ranking still places the country near the bottom globally. The index measures constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, open government, fundamental rights, order and security, regulatory enforcement, civil justice and criminal justice.

Corruption remains part of that institutional problem. Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index gave Nigeria 26 out of 100 and ranked it 142nd of 182 countries. The media, another pillar of democratic accountability, faces its own pressure. Reporters Without Borders ranked Nigeria 122nd of 180 countries in its 2025 World Press Freedom Index, with a score of 46.81. Its security indicator placed Nigeria 152nd. So, has Nigeria moved backwards since 1960? The honest answer is more complicated than either celebration or condemnation. Nigeria is vastly different from the country of 1960. It has a larger economy, a larger population, stronger communications technology, deeper private-sector activity, more universities, a globally influential creative industry and a sustained period of civilian government since 1999. The data also show recent improvements in fiscal revenue, foreign reserves, growth and inflation compared with the worst period of the recent economic crisis. But progress in one dimension does not cancel failure in another. A country can become more connected while becoming less affordable. It can produce more graduates while losing skilled workers. It can hold elections while citizens become less willing to vote. It can have courts while confidence in institutions remains weak. It can generate economic growth while poverty remains widespread.

This is the central independence question at 66: independent from whom, and independent for whom? In 1960, independence meant freedom from colonial political control. In 2026, its meaning should be measured by the freedom of Nigerians to build viable lives at home. Can a child obtain quality education without leaving the country? Can a graduate find productive work? Can a doctor remain because the system gives a reason to stay? Can a farmer reach a market safely? Can a business operate with dependable electricity? Can a citizen challenge government in court and trust the process? Can a journalist investigate power without intimidation? Can a voter believe participation matters? The evidence does not justify saying that Nigeria has achieved none of these things. Nor does it justify pretending the problems are small. The statistics point to a country with substantial capacity but an enormous gap between potential and outcomes.

At 66, the challenge is therefore not to ask whether Nigeria should celebrate independence. It should. The more useful question is what kind of independence Nigerians want to experience next. The answer will not be found in flags, speeches or anniversary slogans. It will be found in classrooms, hospitals, factories, farms, courts, polling units and homes. Nigeria has been politically independent for 66 years. The unfinished task is to make that independence measurable in human lives.

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