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AUTHORITARIAN TENDENCIES AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION WITHIN THE DEMOCRATIC FRAMEWORK IN NIGERIA; THE FOURTH REPUBLIC IN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study investigated authoritarian tendencies and political polarization within Nigeria's democratic framework during the fourth Republic (1999–present), using a qualitative approach based on secondary data from scholarly articles, government reports, and electoral records. Guided by the competitive authoritarianism theory, which explains regimes blending democratic institutions with authoritarian practices, the research critically examines the persistence of autocratic behaviours alongside Nigeria's formal democracy. Findings revealed that, despite constitutional provisions for democracy, authoritarian tendencies persist through executive dominance, media restrictions, and selective law enforcement, undermining institutional checks and balances. Political polarization has deepened, manipulated along ethnic, regional, and party lines by elites aiming to entrench power and marginalize opposition forces. This polarization not only heightens voter disenfranchisement but also threatens the country's fragile national unity. Furthermore, weakened institutions and limited judicial independence create an enabling environment for democratic backsliding, where electoral processes are often ceremonial rather than genuinely competitive. Based on these findings, the study recommended strengthening the autonomy of institutions such as the judiciary and electoral commissions to resist political interference effectively. Promoting inclusive political dialogue across ethnic and party divides as essential to reducing polarization and enhance national cohesion. Additionally, fostering media independence alongside comprehensive civic education can empower citizens to hold leaders accountable and engage meaningfully in democratic governance.

Keywords: Authoritarian tendencies, Political polarization, Democratic framework, Media independence, Fourth republic Nigeria

Introduction

Authoritarian tendencies and political polarization represent significant challenges to democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which began with the transition from military rule in 1999. Despite the restoration of democratic governance, the persistence of authoritarian practices within elected civilian governments has been widely documented. These tendencies manifest in political "sit-tight" mentalities, manipulation of electoral processes, and the dominance of oligarchic elites who subvert democratic norms to continuing in power (Egbeffor, 2015; Adenuga, 2023). This has undermined the quality of democracy, breeding a hybrid system where democratic institutions exist alongside authoritarian practices. The authoritarian legacy from military rule remains influential, curtailing civil liberties and shrinking democratic space, despite formal democratic structures, (Odion-Akhaine, 2002; Manuwa, 2023). This environment constrains popular participation and weakens the rule of law in Nigeria's nascent democracy. Parallel to authoritarian tendencies, political polarization in Nigeria further complicates democratic governance. Nigeria's socio-political landscape is highly fragmented along ethnic, religious, and regional lines, causing intense polarization especially during elections and governance transitions, which threatens national cohesion (Yusufu, & Abdulsalam, 2025). Political polarization is exacerbated by media influence and the entrenchment of identity politics, leading to fragmented public discourse and a divided electorate resistant to compromise (Okoro, 2024). The rivalry between major political parties such as the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) exemplifies elite polarization that trickles down to mass politics, often at the expense of national development (Lawal & Oluwatoyin, 2011). The combination of authoritarian impulses and deep polarization not only hampers democratic consolidation but also stymies effective governance and socioeconomic progress in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

The significance of studying authoritarian tendencies and political polarization within Nigeria's democratic framework is threefold. First, it enables a deeper understanding of the structural and institutional weaknesses inhibiting democratic culture and the rule of law, thereby informing policy reforms. Second, it sheds light on the socio-political dynamics that fuel division and insecurity, crucial for designing interventions to promote national unity and social cohesion. Third, this study contributes to democratic theory by exploring the paradox of electoral democracy coexisting with autocratic practices and societal fracturing in a post-military context. Accordingly, the study's objectives are: (1) to examine the manifestations of authoritarian tendencies in Nigeria's Fourth Republic; (2) to analyze the causes and consequences of political polarization in the democratic process; and (3) to assess how these phenomena impact democratic consolidation and governance outcomes. Corresponding research questions include: How do authoritarian tendencies manifest in Nigeria's democratic institutions? What are the key drivers of political polarization in Nigeria's Fourth Republic? How do authoritarianism and polarization affect democratic consolidation and national development in Nigeria? These insights will guide strategies to strengthen Nigeria's democratic trajectory.

Conceptual Review

Conceptualizing Authoritarian Tendencies: Authoritarian tendencies refer to political behaviors and systems where power is concentrated in a single authority or a small group

that demands strict obedience from the populace, often at the expense of political pluralism and individual freedoms. Core characteristics include highly centralized government control, repression of dissent, manipulation of civil liberties, and the use of coercive means to maintain stability and suppress opposition (Madueke, & Enyiazu, 2025). Authoritarianism is marked by indefinite political tenure, exclusion of opposition through mass organizations or armed force, and institutional manipulation, such as subjugating the judiciary and electoral bodies. Psychological perspectives, like the authoritarian personality theory by (Adorno 1950s cited in Odion-Akhaine, 2002), suggest that certain personality traits predispose individuals to favor strict hierarchical authority and conformity, especially under conditions of social instability (Odion-Akhaine, 2002). In contemporary political analysis, authoritarianism is often observed not only in explicit autocracies but also within nominally democratic states exhibiting authoritarian practices, such as undermining independent institutions, media repression, and electoral manipulations. For example, African political parties have sometimes developed authoritarian one-party democracies by controlling electoral commissions, judiciary, and fracturing opposition parties, using ethnic-religious divisions strategically to entrench power. Such regimes maintain dominance through informal networks of power and clientelism, affecting governance quality and social justice (Adenuga, & Akingbulu, 2024). The psychological underpinning of authoritarianism also links to stress responses where citizens and leaders may support strongman rule out of perceived insecurity and anxiety, complicating democratization efforts even in states with formal democratic structures (Schnelle, Baler, Hadjar, & Klaus, 2021).

In the Nigerian context, authoritarian tendencies have been evident in the country's political trajectory. Despite transitioning to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has experienced recurring challenges such as executive overreach, judicial compromises, and limitations on press freedom, which reflect authoritarian resilience. Under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, notable regressions towards authoritarianism include intimidation of the judiciary and opposition, security service abuses, and restriction of civil society activities, reminiscent of his earlier military rule in the 1980s (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Political parties like the PDP have been accused of manipulating electoral bodies like INEC and undermining democratic institutions to maintain dominance. This persistence of authoritarian practices intertwines with Nigeria's "culture of authoritarianism," where democratic institutions coexist with authoritarian governance styles, weakening democratic consolidation and citizen trust (Odion-Akhaine, 2002; Council on Foreign Relations 2020).

Conceptualization of Political Polarization

Political polarization is broadly defined as the growing ideological divide and opposition between political groups, where individuals and factions increasingly adhere to extreme positions over moderate or centrist viewpoints. This phenomenon is often characterized by a strong "us versus them" mentality, resulting in mutual distrust, hostile attitudes, and a breakdown of cooperative political discourse. Several scholars have noted that polarization is driven by dynamics such as political leaders exploiting grievances or fears to mobilize support, media amplification of divisive rhetoric, and psychological biases like motivated reasoning, where individuals interpret information in ways that reinforce their partisan identities (McCoy, 2022; Arthur, 2025). Polarization can manifest in both elite-level conflicts between political leaders and popular-level divisions among the electorate, each compounding the other and making political compromise more difficult or seemingly impossible.

The causes of political polarization are multifaceted, including political activism that pushes parties toward ideological extremes, electoral systems and distracting practices that favoured polarized candidates, and media ecosystems especially social media that create echo chambers where users consume information that primarily confirms their preexisting beliefs (Arthur, 2025). This environment rewards radical positions and undermines centrists or moderates, weakening democratic deliberation and promoting political gridlock or even social conflict. Psychological factors reinforce this divide as well; emotional investments in group loyalty cause individuals to reject opposing viewpoints and factual challenges, leading to hardened attitudes and persistent divisions. Pernicious polarization, as conceptualized in political science, occurs when a single cleavage such as partisan identity or ethnic division becomes so dominant that it crowds out other social bonds and creates entrenched mutual hostility that spreads beyond politics into societal relations (Arthur, 2025). In the Nigerian context, political polarization is deeply intertwined with ethnic, regional, and religious cleavages that sustain a high level of contestation and hostility in the electoral and governance arena. Nigeria's multiparty democracy is often marked by intense competition among ethnic blocs and religious affiliations, which political actors exploit to consolidate their support bases, reinforcing an "us versus them" framework. This dynamic exacerbates tensions and sometimes undermines national integration efforts, as political discourse frequently aligns with sectarian and regional identities rather than issue-based politics or policy considerations. Moreover, clientelism and regional patronage further deepen divisions, where political loyalty is often traded for material benefits, increasing mistrust across groups (Adejumobi & Agbaje, 2023). The Nigerian experience demonstrates how political polarization, reinforced by historical grievances and socioeconomic disparities, challenges democratic consolidation and complicates efforts to build inclusive governance structures.

Conceptualizing Democratic Framework

Democratic frameworks are foundational structures that guide the organization, processes, and principles of democratic governance. Fundamentally, democracy embodies the notion that government authorities derive from the consent of the governed, emphasizing the participation of citizens in decision-making processes. Characteristics of democratic frameworks include majority rule tempered by minority rights, protection of individual freedoms, and mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency in government actions (Manuwa, 2023; Inter Parliamentary Union, 1998). The rule of law is central, ensuring that laws apply equally to all citizens, and institutions such as the judiciary, police, and military operate impartially without partisan bias. Moreover, a multiparty system enriches political competition, offering citizens genuine choice and preventing the concentration of power that characterizes authoritarian regimes (Inter Parliamentary Union, 1998; Jonathan, 2024). A democratic framework establishes norms and institutions that sustain political equality, social justice, human rights, and responsive governance. It recognizes the plurality of views within a society and requires the existence of representative institutions at all levels national, regional, and local that reflect the will of the people. Democracy also thrives on peaceful competition for power through free, fair, and transparent elections, enabling the peaceful alternation of leadership. Moreover, democratic governance involves a balance between individual rights and collective social cohesion, fostering dialogue and compromise among diverse groups to maintain social stability and national solidarity (Inter Parliamentary Union, 1998). Civil society engagement and citizen

participation beyond voting, such as public debates and peaceful protests, are pillars that sustain and deepen democratic culture (Jonathan, 2024).

Viewing democratic frameworks through the Nigerian context reveals both the aspirations and challenges of democratic consolidation. Nigeria's democracy, which began since 1999, incorporates multiparty elections, rule of law, and constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights. However, the Nigerian democratic framework grapples with systemic issues such as electoral malpractices, political patronage, weak institutional independence, and ethnic-religious cleavages that complicate governance and social cohesion (Ojo, 2024). While democratic principles assert political equality and citizen participation, practical realities in Nigeria show disparities in access to power and influence, often influenced by money politics and clientelism. Nonetheless, Nigeria's democratic journey continues to evolve, with efforts toward electoral reforms, judicial strengthening, and civic education aimed at deepening democratic norms and rule of law to enhance political accountability and social inclusion (Adejumobi, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The Competitive Authoritarianism Theory: Competitive authoritarianism is a political regime type defined by the coexistence of democratic institutions and authoritarian practices, where elections and legislatures operate but incumbents manipulate these frameworks to maintain significant advantages over opponents. According to Levitsky and Way (2010), competitive authoritarian regimes hold regular elections, allowing opposition parties to participate, but the playing field is uneven due to frequent abuses such as media censorship, judicial manipulation, and state resource misuse. Unlike full democracies which meet minimum standards of free, fair elections, political rights, and governmental authority, competitive authoritarian regimes violate these standards systematically, creating a hybrid form where authoritarian tendencies thrive within a nominal democratic framework. This theory is instrumental for understanding how ostensibly democratic systems, such as Nigeria's Fourth Republic, exhibit authoritarian features that undermine genuine political competition (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Levitsky & Way, 2002). Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way pioneered the theory of competitive authoritarianism to explain contemporary political regimes that cannot be classified purely as democratic or authoritarian. Their work highlights how these regimes may emerge from transitions that fall short of full democratization due to weak opposition, organizational limitations, or incumbent strategies to retain power while maintaining a facade of democratic legitimacy. Key proponents argue that this regime type is relevant in many post-Cold War states, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where economic crises and international pressures shaped incomplete democratic transitions. Competitive authoritarianism elucidates the mechanisms through which rulers sustain political dominance, such as manipulating electoral laws, controlling media, and employing legal or extralegal tactics to weaken rivals, thereby deepening political polarization and authoritarian tendencies within democratic institutions (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Chacon, 2009).

In the context of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, competitive authoritarianism is relevant for analyzing how authoritarian tendencies coexist and reinforce political polarization within the democratic framework. Nigeria exhibits recurring political conflicts characterized by the dominance of incumbents who use institutional control and coercion to weaken opposition parties, eroding democratic norms and exacerbating societal divisions. The theory helps explain why democratic institutions are often undermined by election irregularities, party manipulations, and executive aggrandizement, all of which fuel intense political polarization.

This scholarly lens allows researchers to critically assess Nigeria's democratic trajectory, where the persistence of authoritarian practices amid formal democratic processes challenges democratic consolidation and reinforces elite-driven polarization (Levitsky & Way 2010; Madueke, & Enyiazu, 2025).

Gap / Contribution to Knowledge

The identification of authoritarian tendencies in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has received limited scholarly attention. This gap in the literature restricts a comprehensive understanding of the subtle manifestations and evolution of authoritarianism within Nigeria's democratic framework. By focusing on this aspect, the study advances knowledge by systematically uncovering and analyzing these tendencies, thereby enriching discourse on Nigeria's democratic development. Political polarization's causes and consequences within Nigeria's democratic processes remain under explored. Existing research often overlooks the dynamics fueling deep divisions and their effects on governance and political stability. This study addresses the gap by thoroughly investigating the origins, mechanisms, and impacts of polarization, offering new insights that contribute meaningfully to political science literature relevant to emerging democracies. The dual impact of authoritarianism and political polarization on democratic consolidation and governance outcomes has not been sufficiently examined in Nigeria. By exploring how these factors interact and influence Nigeria's democratic trajectory, this study provides a critical contribution. It enhances understanding of obstacles to democratic stability and practical governance challenges, thereby broadening the existing body of knowledge on democratic consolidation in complex political environments.

Findings/ Discussion

Identifying the Manifestation of Authoritarian Tendencies in Nigeria Fourth Republic: The manifestations of authoritarian tendencies in Nigeria's Fourth Republic are vividly evident through a range of political and institutional behaviours that undermine democratic principles. One salient manifestation is the deployment of state resources and security apparatus to suppress opposition, creating a *de facto* one-party dominance particularly under the People's Democratic Party (PDP) during its early years in power. The security agencies, including the police, were often employed to intimidate, arrest arbitrarily, and violently disrupt opposition activities, contravening both constitutional freedoms and international norms on freedom of assembly and expression. This pattern of state-orchestrated violence and intimidation aimed to entrench the ruling party's dominance, eroding the basic tenets of equality and political freedom, which is fundamental to democracy (Adenuga, & Akingbulu, 2024). Another clear indicator of authoritarianism in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is the manipulation and erosion of institutional independence, notably of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the judiciary. The ruling party's control over appointments and funding severely compromised INEC's neutrality, making it susceptible to political manipulation that distorted the electoral process. These interference's undermined the credibility of elections and subverted the people's right to fair representation. Similarly, the judiciary's vulnerability to political pressures weakened its role as a check on executive overreach, further entrenching authoritarian governance. This institutional erosion allowed ruling elites to maintain power through constitutional amendments attempts, electoral malpractices, and selective enforcement of anti-corruption agencies against opposition (Adenuga, & Akingbulu, 2024; Bashir, 2019). Moreover, the Fourth Republic exhibited authoritarian traits through the persistence of elitism, political

“godfatherism,” and the “sit-tight” mentality, where incumbents actively sought to perpetuate themselves in power by manipulating democratic processes. This oligarchic tendency, blending former military rulers, politicians, businessmen, and bureaucrats, undermined egalitarian democratic ideals and promoted exclusionary political practices. Coupled with flawed constitutional provisions and electoral processes, these factors created a hybrid regime characterized by authoritarian features embedded within a nominally democratic framework. The Fourth Republic's democratic dispensation, though officially civilian, continuously faced challenges from these authoritarian tendencies, which negatively impacted human rights protections and democratic consolidation in Nigeria (Egbefor, 2015; Adenuga, 2023).

The Causes and Consequences of Political Polarization in Nigeria Democratic Process

Political polarization in Nigeria's democratic process stems from a complex interweaving of eth-no-religious identities, economic inequalities, and the influence of media dynamics. One core cause is the deep-rooted ethnic and religious diversity that shapes political allegiances, where ethnic and religious identities are often politicized during elections, reinforcing an “us versus them” mentality among voters and political elites (Madueke, & Enyiazu, 2025). This divide is further exacerbated by economic disparities that fuel resentment and competition for resources, which politicians exploit by rallying supporters along ethnic or class lines. Additionally, the emergence of partisan and social media platforms creates echo chambers that reinforce existing biases by limiting exposure to alternative viewpoints. Social media algorithms intensify this effect, enabling the rapid spread of disinformation and further entrenching divisions (Arisekola 2024). The consequences of such political polarization are far-reaching and detrimental to Nigeria's democratic stability. One significant effect is the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and processes, where polarized groups view election outcomes as illegitimate when they do not favor their partisan affiliations. This erosion undermines democratic norms and often leads to institutional gridlock, weakening governance effectiveness (Arisekola 2024). Moreover, the polarization has fueled an increase in political violence and radicalization. The normalization of extreme rhetoric in online echo chambers translates into real-world confrontations, contributing to incidents of violence during electoral periods (Arisekola 2024). The growing disconnect between political factions hampers cross-partisan dialogue and compromises, stalling efforts at national unity and democratic consolidation.

Furthermore, political polarization in Nigeria aggravates ethnic-religious conflicts and hampers democratic consolidation by deepening social fragmentation. Ethnic power struggles and political communication strategies heavily reliant on ethnic narratives have been shown to shape voter behavior and polarize the electorate, especially during significant elections like the 2023 presidential poll (Yusufu, & Abdulsalam, 2025). These ethnicized political communications, amplified by social media, foster misinformation and heighten distrust in electoral integrity. The result is a fragile democratic environment where polarization not only threatens electoral credibility but also national cohesion, making it imperative for reforms that promote inclusive dialogue, greater media responsibility, and socioeconomic equity to strengthen Nigerian democracy (Madueke, & Enyiazu, 2025).

Authoritarian and Political Polarization Impacts on Democratic Consolidation and Governance Outcome in Nigeria

Authoritarianism has deeply impacted Nigeria's democratic consolidation by undermining institutional frameworks and limiting political freedoms necessary for a stable democracy.

Following decades of military rule, Nigeria's transition to civilian governance was expected to enhance democratic values: However, authoritarian tendencies have persisted under ostensibly civilian administrations (Adeakin, 2012). These tendencies manifest through restrictions on dissent, judiciary interference, media suppression, and the use of security agencies to quell opposition voices, which cumulatively weaken democratic norms and public trust in institutions (Egwufor, 2015). Such authoritarian legacies complicate the entrenchment of democratic consolidation by sustaining oligarchic rule structures and marginalizing broad political participation, ultimately destabilizing governance outcomes and eroding democratic quality (Adeakin, 2012). Political polarization exacerbates challenges to Nigeria's democratic consolidation and governance by deepening ethnic-religious divides and socio-political fragmentation. The competition between the country's major political parties often translates into intense polarization along ethnic and religious lines, undermining national unity and creating confrontational politics (Madueke, & Enyiazu, 2025). This divide influences electoral processes and governance decisions, where political allegiance frequently surpasses national interest, causing instability and weakening democratic institutions (Ameh-Ogigo, 2025). Additionally, the media and social media platforms amplify this polarization, sometimes promoting disinformation and echo chamber effects that fragment the public sphere, obstructing cohesion and cooperative governance (Madueke, & Enyiazu, 2025; Yusufu, & Abdulsalam, 2025). The youth, facing political alienation amid these divisions, become less engaged in democratic processes, further weakening democratic sustainability (Madueke, & Enyiazu, 2025).

The combined impact of authoritarianism and political polarization significantly obstructs democratic consolidation and governance quality in Nigeria. Authoritarian practices, often justified by security concerns amid ethnic-religious conflicts and economic inequalities, normalize exclusionary politics and suppress opposition, which weakens democratic accountability and the rule of law (Adeakin, 2012). Political polarization, meanwhile, fuels societal divisions and hinders the development of inclusive political institutions necessary for democratic resilience (Ameh-Ogigo, 2025). These dynamics also impair governance outcomes by fostering elite manipulation, eroding public trust, and undermining policy continuity (Olusegun, 2022). To advance Nigeria's democratic consolidation, addressing authoritarian legacies and mitigating polarizing politics through institutional strengthening, inclusive governance, and civic education is essential (Adeakin, 2012; Olusegun, 2022).

Conclusion

The Fourth Republic in Nigeria, while hailed as the country's longest period of democratic rule since independence, has simultaneously witnessed persistent authoritarian tendencies and deep political polarization that challenge the democratic framework. Despite successful transitions of power through elections, the democracy remains heavily influenced by military legacies, with a militarized approach to governance evident in the disproportionate allocation of resources to security and recurrent military involvement in civilian affairs. This militarization of the state undermines democratic practices by fostering an environment where the rule of force often supersedes dialogue, weakening institutions and eroding civil liberties. Political competition under the Fourth Republic has been marked by the dominance of incumbent parties, especially the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and recently the All Progressive Party (APC). They leveraged on state resources, media control, and security apparatuses to suppress opposition and skew electoral processes, thereby

entrenching political patronage and vote-buying. Such dynamics deepen political polarization, as governance becomes characterized by zero-sum rivalries and exclusionary practices rather than inclusive governance and consensus-building. The resulting democratic fragility is compounded by weak institutional checks and balances, recurrent election irregularities, and a political culture where authoritarian legacies persist beneath ostensibly democratic institutions. Hence, Nigeria's Fourth Republic exemplifies a complex hybrid regime where democratic forms coexist with authoritarian practices, highlighting the urgent need for stronger democratic consolidation measures that can address militarization, electoral integrity, and political inclusivity within Nigeria's evolving democratic landscape.

Recommendations

- i. Strengthen Democratic Institutions: Enhance the independence and capacity of democratic institutions such as the judiciary, legislature, and electoral bodies (e.g., INEC) to resist undue influence by authoritarian actors and political godfathers, ensuring fair and transparent electoral and governance processes.
- ii. Promote Political Inclusion and Ethnic Cohesion: Implement policies that reduce ethnic and sectional politics, promoting inclusive governance and national integration to reduce polarization exploited by political elites for personal gain.
- iii. Enforce Term Limits and Anti-Entrenchment Measures: Establish and enforce strict legal frameworks to prevent incumbents and political elites from manipulating transitions or using state resources to perpetuate their hold on power, addressing the sit-tight tendencies noted in Nigeria's democratic governance.
- iv. Enhance Civic Education and Media Freedom: Invest in civic education initiatives to raise public awareness of democratic rights and responsibilities while protecting press freedom to foster informed citizen participation and accountability, thereby countering authoritarian repression tactics.

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