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DEMOCRACY IN PERIL - ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF STATE CAPTURE IN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLIC TRUST: A CASE STUDY OF RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

External partners, including the African Union, United Nations, European Union, United States, and bilateral donors, should support ECOWAS in its initiatives to prevent electoral violence, while respecting the organization's autonomy and regional ownership. External partners should provide dependable, multi-year funding for ECOWAS electoral assistance programs, thus reducing the organization's dependence on project-based funding that is often unpredictable and frequently tied to external priorities (Francis, 2009). External partners are required to align their electoral observation and prevention efforts with ECOWAS, to avoid the emergence of conflicting observation missions, which could lead to confusion among stakeholders and enable manipulation. The AU, UN, and EU should acknowledge ECOWAS as the leading regional authority in West African electoral issues, providing support as necessary while avoiding the establishment of parallel structures that might undermine ECOWAS's authority (Tieku, 2012). Regarding the AES withdrawal, external partners face a difficult choice. Recognising the AES states would affirm the withdrawal and might accelerate the fragmentation of ECOWAS. However, choosing not to engage with AES states would lead to electoral processes in those regions missing out on any international observation or support. The most effective strategy likely entails upholding a position of non-recognition of the AES as an official entity, while also pragmatically interacting with AES member states as distinct nations. This would involve providing electoral support on a bilateral basis, while maintaining that ECOWAS remains the legitimate regional framework.

Keywords: State Capture, Godfatherism, Democratic Institutions, Public Trust, Rivers State, Nigeria, Godfatherism, Emergency Rule.

Introduction

Accountability, the rule of law, and the common good underpin democracy (George, 2025). However, state capture—a sort of systemic corruption in which private or political interests try to influence a nation's decision-making is threatening these ideals worldwide

(Transparency International, 2024). Undermining public institutions allows a privileged few to grab state resources and power, degrading democratic governance from within (Okonjo-Iweala & Osita-Ogbu, 2024). In Nigeria, Africa's most populous democracy, this threat is real and has alarmed citizens, civil society, and political leaders (Premium Times, 2025).
Nigeria has been in democratic recession since 1999 (Ibrahim, 2024). Due to corruption, compromise, and accountability issues, the National Assembly, Judiciary, and INEC are at their weakest, repeatedly failing the public (Vanguard, 2025). The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) claims that the All Progressives Congress (APC) government has undermined these institutions, turning the National Assembly into a "rubber-stamp" and undermining public trust in the rule of law through dubious judicial decisions (PDP, 2025). Public cynicism has grown due to institutional integrity issues, poor voting turnout, and a growing divide between government and citizenry (Punch, 2023). Analysts say this dilemma stems from the establishment of a system in which federal, state, and local elites work to maintain power and control, destroying democracy as it seems (ThisDay, 2025).

The worrisome dynamics are best seen in Rivers State, a major Niger Delta oil producer (Guardian, 2025). Rivers State, formerly called the "treasure base of the nation," is now a notable example of state capture, with its political environment in instability (Sahara Reporters, 2025). After the 2023 general elections, Siminalayi Fubara, the governor, and Nyesom Wike, who became Minister of the Federal Capital Territory, fought a bitter power struggle which escalated the state's crisis (Daily Trust, 2025). The House of Assembly complex was destroyed and Governor Fubara was impeached multiple times due to this battle over the state's political and economic institutions (Channels Television, 2025).

A shocking federal action climaxed the issue (BBC News Pidgin, 2025). Presidency Bola Tinubu declared a state of emergency in Rivers State in March 2025, suspending the democratically elected governor, his deputy, and the state House of Assembly. Former navy commander Vice Admiral Ibok-Ete Ibas (rtd.) has been named Sole Administrator to handle the state's affairs, reporting directly to Abuja's Federal Executive Council (FEC) (Presidency of Nigeria, 2025). Opposition parties and civil society organisations called this intervention a "well-executed takeover" and a state capture to advance the political agenda of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) (CISLAC, 2025).

Critics said that the emergency rule disenfranchised Rivers State residents and entrenched Nyesom Wike's domination without an electoral mandate by centralising all decision-making in Abuja and limiting Rivers representation in the FEC (Sun News, 2025). The Sole Administrator's plans to appoint new local council administrators were considered as attempts to destabilise the current political structure and violate Supreme Court rulings that safeguard local government autonomy (Sun News, 2025).

In September 2025, emergency rule was lifted, although instability persisted (Leadership, 2025). The capture project's deep roots were revealed when the crisis entered a new phase (Arise News, 2025). Rivers State House of Assembly, along with Minister Wike, began a second impeachment procedure against Governor Fubara in January 2026, citing many gross misconduct claims (Tribune, 2025).

The Independent (2026) reported extra-budgetary spending of over N800 billion, withholding monies from the legislature, demolition of the Assembly structure, and overall disregard for

the law. This renewed political assault shows how a powerful elite is trying to force the elected government to submit or be overthrown (Punch, 2026). The main motivation is to consolidate political power before the 2027 general elections to align Rivers State's significant political and economic resources with the president and his main ally (ThisDay, 2026). Minister Wike has openly announced a "rainbow coalition" between the APC and PDP to select all elective seats in the state for 2027, a bold political realignment to influence the state's destiny (Vanguard, 2026).

Rivers State provides a valuable insight on state capture in democracy (African Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025). The Rivers crisis illustrates the use of state institutions like the legislature and the presidency's emergency powers for political vendettas (Daily Trust, 2025); the judiciary's compromise in the conflict with contradictory rulings (Guardian, 2025); the decline of public trust as governance is overshadowed by political survival (Sahara Reporters, 2026); and the ultimate outcome. This study examines how state capture affects democratic institutions and public trust in Rivers State, Nigeria. It will examine how this crisis has weakened governance, institutional integrity, and voters' views of democracy (George, 2026).

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria has had unbroken democracy since 1999, yet electoral democracy has not led to substantive democracy (Ibrahim, 2024). Nigeria has regular elections and administration-to-administration changes, but institutional supremacy over personality-based politics is lacking (Okonjo-Iweala & Osita-Ogbu, 2024). This paradox has caused "elective dictatorship", political elites taking state institutions to avoid popular elections (George, 2025). Democracy is being hollowed out to serve elite interests rather than the public (Transparency International, 2024). The democratic crisis is centred on Rivers State, one of Nigeria's most crucial and resource-rich states (Guardian, 2025). This intense political conflict between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and his predecessor, Minister Nyesom Wike, has highlighted Nigeria's democratic architecture's inadequacies since the 2023 national elections (Premium Times, 2025). The governor has faced three impeachment attempts since October 2023, the House of Assembly complex was demolished, a state of emergency was declared in March 2025, and institutional confusion has increased due to conflicting court rulings (Channels Television, 2025; Punch, 2026; Federal Government of Nigeria, 2025; Guardian, 2025). Rivers State's democratic institutions have been subverted. The Rivers State House of Assembly is divided, threatens impeachment, and prioritises procedural battles above growth (ThisDay, 2025). Judicial legitimacy has been eroded by competition for judicial orders and institutional collaboration (Vanguard, 2025). The executive branch is debilitated by removal threats, budget disputes, and the breakdown of the mentorship-succession compact that maintains elite political arrangements (Sun News, 2025).

This issue stems from godfatherism, when political mentors finance campaigns, control party infrastructure, and demand loyalty and returns on investment from their successors (African Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025). Governor Fubara's refusal to remain politically indebted to his benefactor caused a conflict that illustrated how informal power networks frequently preempt democratic norms and constitutional limits (Tribune, 2025). Does the institutional deadlock make elected officials accountable to citizens who exercised their democratic mandate or to political godfathers who supported their rise? George (2026)

Federal intervention has worsened the issue, raising doubts about federal neutrality in subnational politics (Leadership, 2025). President Tinubu's March 2025 state of emergency was denounced as a "unconstitutional power grab" that breached Section 305 of the 1999 Constitution and threatened state autonomy in Nigeria (PDP, 2025). The PDP branded the news a "well-executed takeover" for the ruling APC (CISLAC, 2025). Emergency rule in September 2025 did not restore stability, but it ushered in a more sophisticated phase of political strife, with repeated impeachment procedures in January 2026 indicating the capture effort's persistence.

This extended crisis affects more than the political elite (Arise News, 2025). Governance is broken, with public servants worried, firms hesitant to invest, and growth plans blocked (Independent, 2026). Local government elections in August 2025 were labelled "sham" and "allocation rather than election," harming grassroots democracy (Punch, 2023). Repeated impeachment attempts pose a "grave danger" to Rivers State, the Niger Delta, and Nigeria's democracy, according to the Ijaw National Congress (ThisDay, 2026 Minister Wike's "rainbow coalition" between the APC and PDP to fill all state election seats in 2027 is a daring political realignment to secure elite control over the state's democratic destiny (Premium Times, 2026).

State capture and elective dictatorship theories reveal that elite influence has undermined elected power in Nigeria (Vanguard, 2026). Scholars have illustrated how political godfathers employ state resources, security agencies, and electoral bodies to overthrow popular will and install their candidates (Daily Trust, 2025). Few empirical studies have examined how these abstract conceptions originate in specific subnational contexts, particularly in resource-rich states with high political and economic concerns (Sahara Reporters, 2026). State capture, legislature weaponization, judiciary compromise, federal emergency powers, and public confidence erosion is illustrated by the Rivers State crisis (Channels Television, 2026).

Few studies have studied how extended elite political warfare affects citizens' democracy perceptions (Guardian, 2025). The impact of institutional crisis on public trust, civic engagement, and democratic involvement is unknown (Ibrahim, 2024), yet national voter turnout and political disengagement have dropped (Premium Times, 2025). Rivers State, where governance has been secondary to political survival for almost two years, needs to know how ordinary residents regard democracy and if they trust democratic institutions (Okonjo-Iweala & Osita-Ogbu, 2024). Preliminary assessments suggest the crisis is making residents distrust democracy and politics (George, 2025). Therefore, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the mechanisms and manifestations of state capture in Rivers State's political crisis since 2023?
2. How has the protracted political conflict impacted the functionality and integrity of key democratic institutions in the state?
3. What are the perceptions of Rivers State citizens regarding public trust in democratic institutions and processes amid the ongoing crisis?
4. How has the Rivers State crisis shaped broader implications for democratic governance and federal-state relations in Nigeria?

The Concept of Democracy and Its Subversion

Democracy must meet Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people, for the people" standard (Lincoln, 1863). Scholars increasingly distinguish electoral democracy's procedural minimalism from democratic governance's substance (Schumpeter, 1942). Nigerian democracy has not benefited from regular elections and A-to-A transfers (Okonjo-Iweala & Osita-Ogbu, 2024). A society that appears democratic but is dictatorial is dubbed "undemocratic democracy" (George, 2025).

Elective dictatorship explains how democratic processes can be perverted internally (Nwozor, A., et al; 2021). Nwozor et al. (2021) define elective dictatorship as political elites taking state institutions to avoid popular elections. Nigeria's democratic dilemma is elected leaders using democracy to entrench power and diminish accountability. The report also finds that voters' role in democratisation has declined.

Democratic identity in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is hampered by basic issues (Demola, 2025). Scholars say the 1999 restoration to democracy caught the nation unprepared because it lacked the requisite conditions (Demola, 2025). State and political dissatisfaction hamper democracy in Nigeria (Demola, 2025). Nigeria has regressed democratically due to structural issues, contested elections, political meddling, and loss of democratic credibility (Demola, 2025).

State Capture: Origins and Dimensions

After World Bank-sponsored studies on Eastern European transitional economies, state capture has been applied to Global South governance failures (Hellman, Jones, & Kaufmann, 2000). Private or political interests strive to "capture" a nation's regulatory and policy-making apparatus in state capture (Transparency International, 2024).

State capture in Nigeria blends prebendal politics, treating public jobs as personal benefits with institutional subversion, which hollows down democratic structures while keeping their appearance (Yagboyaju, 2010). Nigeria's political culture's lack of institutional dominance over personality-based politics has helped this (Ibrahim, 2024).

State capture generates systemic governance problems beyond political manipulation (Chatham House, 2025). Nigeria's democracy and economy suffer from corruption's impunity and clientelism (Chatham House, 2025). After military control disappeared, politicisation, weak institutions, and leadership double standards hampered corruption efforts (Chatham House, 2025). Failure to fight corruption has left the public believing those engaged are unaccountable and opponents at risk (Chatham House, 2025).

Godfatherism and Prebendal Politics

Nigerian elite politics is dominated by godfatherism (JOMBO, 2025). Democracy's 1999 return to hazardous godfatherism changed its definition (UMUNNA, 2025). Democracy, intended for everybody, now serves elites and the few (UMUNNA, 2025). Citizens have little say in who governs or what policies (UMUNNA, 2025). Because the ruling class, their families, and their cronies share the nation's wealth, democracy rarely benefits ordinary people (UMUNNA, 2025).

JOMBO (2025) examines patronage, godfatherism, and executive-legislative issues in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. According to the study, these dynamics affect political power, decision-making, and administrative performance. Patronage politics, godfatherism, and

executive-legislative disputes impede Nigerian institutional performance (JOMBO, 2025). These dynamics strengthen a governance structure that values personal loyalty, political allegiance, and elite interests over national development and institutional efficiency (JOMBO, 2025).

Godfatherism occurs when powerful political leaders (godfathers) finance campaigns, control party machinery, and demand allegiance and returns on investment from their protégés (godsons) who become elected politicians (JOMBO, 2025). This relationship creates a basic accountability deficit: elected officials put their political benefactors above their constituents (JOMBO, 2025). Odiaka (2026) believes governance should be a public trust founded on the desire of the people and acted upon, not a private contract struck behind closed doors for personal gain.

Godfatherism and its diseases are shown by the Rivers State political crisis (Premium Times, 2025). Again, Rivers State godfathers assist successors but dethrone them (ThisDay, 2025). In 2025, Rotimi Amaechi parted with Peter Odili, who supported her rise (ThisDay, 2025). Amaechi then backed rebel Nyesom Wike (ThisDay, 2025). The Fubara-Wike quarrel demonstrates godfatherism's paradoxes produce political instability (ThisDay, 2025). Godfatherism theory examines predatory and benign political mentorship (UMUNNA, 2025).

UMUNNA (2025) claims that godfatherism is not terrible but becomes a hydra-headed monster when ethics are abandoned and it becomes criminal. Political sponsorship motives, not godfathers are crucial. Godfathers in Nigeria have typically sought rents and maintained control after their protégés took office (UMUNNA, 2025). The study shows that godfatherism frequently leads to godfather-godson conflicts, hurting the majority.

According to Odiaka (2026), public statements and media reports have linked the Rivers situation to a godfather-godson political pact over state matters. This revelation should appal every democratic person. They realised they were working together to obtain and keep power by replacing the consent of the governed with a covenant of convenience.

Institutional Decay and Democratic Recession

Democratic consolidation advocates strong, autonomous institutions to support democracy (Huntington, 1991). Nigeria's Fourth Republic has suffered institutional decline that weakens democracy (Nwozor et al; 2021). Nigeria possesses democracy's formalities, but Nwozor et al. (2021) say institutional dominance over personality-based politics is absent.

This institutional weakness affects all three government branches (Ibrahim, 2024). In JOMBO (2025), godfatherism and patronage politics generate executive-legislative impasse and administrative incompetence. The legislature is now a vehicle of executive dominance or elite political warfare, as in Rivers State (Vanguard, 2025). Political disputes have complicated the judiciary and damaged public trust in its impartiality (Guardian, 2025).

Institutional breakdown and its impacts are well documented in Chatham House (2025). Corruption has caused a confidence problem in Nigeria's institutions and society, and efforts to address it since military control have had uneven results, according to study. Politicisation, weak institutions, and leadership hypocrisy have impeded these attempts. Lack of corruption control has led to political clientelism and impunity, giving citizens the sense that no one is accountable.

The research also illustrates how unethical practices like diverting scarce government income have hurt the economy, escalated living costs, and degraded institutional integrity, raising insecurity. Such disparities have weakened public trust in government. The disconnect between Nigeria's legal anti-corruption measures and administrative dysfunction undermines public trust in the state and its representatives (Chatham House, 2025).

Electoral Integrity and Voter Trust

Nigeria's electoral history indicates recurring issues with electoral integrity, fundamental to democratic consolidation. Nigerian elections are considered as fights for the state's resources, a society's most valuable assets. Given the significant consequences, politicians utilise any measures to win office, moral or immoral. In Yewa South Local Government, Ogun State, Abdulrahman (2025) found vote buying threatens Nigeria's democracy. Even after electoral changes, voter manipulation and vote buying persist, requiring politicians to win elections in different ways (Abdulrahman, 2025).

Demola (2025) examines democratisation and elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic and believes Nigerians have never been satisfied. The study links democratic backsliding to inherited systemic difficulties, electoral transitions, political interference, and legitimacy. Voter behaviour is altered by electoral integrity erosion (Punch, 2023). The 2023 general election in Nigeria had a low voter turnout of 26.7%, indicating a democracy losing credibility (INEC, 2023). Citizens doubt their participation can change things, especially in Rivers State, where elite political rivalry has damaged governance (Sahara Reporters, 2026).

Chatham House's 2025 public trust and electoral legitimacy evaluation is crucial. 59.2% of Nigerians favour power over honesty, and 61.5% believe others will compromise ethics for scarce resources (Chatham House, 2025). Many say their societies value power and resources over honesty and integrity (Chatham House, 2025).

Public Trust in Institutions

Chatham House's fourth national household survey with Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics provides empirical data on Nigerians' trust in institutions (Chatham House, 2025). The 2023 survey indicated considerable dissatisfaction with political leadership at all levels. The police were most distrusted (46%), followed by the president (36%), and federal government (35%). The judges, municipal governments, and state officials and bodies are distrusted (Chatham House, 2025).

The Nigerian government's tax overhaul and revenue-boosting efforts require public trust insights (Chatham House, 2025). Tax compliance study increasingly emphasises voluntary compliance, driven by informal conventions and attitudes that motivate taxpayers, such as trust. Nigeria has little tax enforcement capacity; therefore, this is crucial. Technocratic tax evasion prevention may fail without taxpayer confidence improvement (Chatham House, 2025).

Anti-corruption sentiment is mixed in survey results. 68.3% of respondents claimed most people's 'main focus was their own personal profit', implying they put themselves before others. Many in their community 'feel awful when someone is being taken advantage of' (73.4%). These opposing views demonstrate Nigerians' delicate relationship with corruption,

recognizing it as a problem but accepting it. This explains corruption, public apathy, and scepticism of anti-corruption efforts (Chatham House, 2025).

Importantly, the survey indicated that Nigerians prioritise fairness, empathy, and social responsibility. The discovery has enormous implications for civic mobilisation against state takeover. Nigerians demand accountable governance and fair treatment, which might be leveraged for collective action, despite high scepticism of official institutions. Public expectations and Nigeria's governance institutions and corruption and morals differ, according to the survey. By emphasising civic duty, empathy, and fairness to mobilise citizens against power abuse, these gaps can rethink anti-corruption reform (Chatham House, 2025).

Chronology and Dynamics of the Rivers State Crisis

In-depth commentary and analysis of the political landscape in Rivers State since October 2023 has been thoroughly documented (Channels Television, 2025). On October 29, 2023, a portion of the Rivers State House of Assembly Complex was detonated prior to Governor Fubara's impeachment (Punch, 2026). On 30 October 2023, pro-Wike MPs initiated impeachment proceedings, and on 31 October 2023, President Tinubu sought to mediate at the Presidential Villa, but the effort was unsuccessful (Premium Times, 2025).

In December 2023, the situation escalated as 27 pro-Wike MPs left the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) to join the All Progressives Congress (APC), sparking constitutional discussions about their defection and legislative positions [95]. In light of rival legislative factions, conflicting court rulings, budget crises, and President Tinubu's March 2025 declaration of a state of emergency, Governor Fubara, along with his deputy and the state House of Assembly, faced a suspension lasting six months (ThisDay, 2025).

Odiaka (2026) examines the dynamics and determines that both primary parties share equal responsibility for the issue. Public statements and media coverage indicate that the Rivers conflict arises from a private political arrangement between a mentor and a protégé concerning state affairs. The godson understood that violating a pact would lead to turmoil, while the godfather recognised that he would exploit chaos if his authority was at risk. Both individuals expected and accepted instability, showing a readiness to sacrifice the well-being of Rivers State for their own personal benefit.

This examination reveals the mechanisms of state capture (George, 2025). Elite interests have the potential to undermine democratic institutions by manipulating the legislature for personal grievances, employing federal emergency powers to address local political disputes, and jeopardising judicial integrity through inconsistent rulings (Daily Trust, 2025).

Citizens' Perceptions and Collective Self-Deception

New Rivers crisis literature investigates citizens' political turmoil responses (Sahara Reporters, 2026). Odiaka (2026) criticises public engagement with the problem, claiming that many Nigerians view the dilemma as a personal fight and excuse one transgression because they hate the other. This "collective self-deception," indicates a hazardous tendency to put convenience before principle.

According to the research, leaders who openly collaborate to subvert democratic choice would be obliged to quit for peace, public trust, and institutional integrity in more civilised political

systems. All parties compromising democracy face politically neutral consequences. Nigeria normalises political wrongdoing, turning politics into a sad farce where citizens must choose one wrong over another and celebrate that choice as justice (Odiaka, 2026).

This critique profoundly challenges democracy and civic duty. Odiaka (2026) claims that Nigerian democracy suffers because citizens support politicians who accept anti-democratic deals because they oppose the alternative or belong to a party. Crises, disappointments, and stagnation reoccur. This culture of self-deception will keep Nigeria bound until Nigerians reject any political arrangement that threatens democracy (Odiaka, 2026).

Governance and Socio-Economic Consequences

The Rivers crisis has major socio-economic repercussions, but scientific evidence is scant. The lengthy deadlock has weakened governance, damaged public trust, and held nearly 9.8 million people hostage to elite brinkmanship, according to The Guardian (2026). Before the October 2023 crisis, Fubara promoted long-stagnant workers, raised pay, paid pensioners, and improved the health sector. Few things have worked since the catastrophe (Guardian, 2026).
Economic losses are high. Big infrastructure projects like the 2023 N200 billion Ring Road are stalled. Business is down, investor confidence is poor, and economic circulation is slowing. Civil society organisations warn that international development partners are halting or terminating projects and funding in Rivers due to high risk. Political uncertainty has cost grassroots crafters, traders, and small business owners patronage (Guardian, 2026).

Crisis has caused social and political conflict. Local jobs, contracts, and development projects increasingly depend on political loyalty (not need). Perceptions of party loyalists receiving public advantages increase marginalisation and resentment. Even the poorest governments are political (Guardian, 2026).

Broader National Context: Threats to Democratic Foundations

Concerns About Authoritarian Drift

Rivers State must be considered in light of national democratic backsliding. In April 2025, 18 prominent Nigerians, including Professor Adele Jinadu, Senator Babafemi Ojudu, Professor Chidi Odinkalu, and Dr. Jibrin Ibrahim, wrote an open letter warning that President Bola Tinubu's administration was trying to dismantle the Fourth Republic's democratic foundations and turn Nigeria into a one-party state (Premium Times, 2025).

Authoritarian rule threatened Nigeria's hard-won civil rule, the letter said. The signatories claimed the leadership was using deception to silence opposition and incite APC defections. According to Premium Times (2025), the government was utilising state agencies like the EFCC to blackmail, threaten, and intimidate opposition figures.

The signatories warned of dire consequences: a return to impunity where the absence of opposition breeds arrogance and unaccountable governance; suffocating diversity of voices and interests, jeopardising Nigeria's federal character; and stifling young Nigerians' political space to organise, question, and contribute to national discourse. They claimed: "We fought military dictatorship, not civilian despotism. Democracy must be saved or lost forever "(Premium Times, 2025).

Special Adviser on Information and Strategy Bayo Onanuga accused "disgruntled opposition figures" and "partisan human rights crusaders" of spreading falsehoods. Leadership stated

democracy in Nigeria is "strong and alive" under President Tinubu and MPs often switch parties (Premium Times, 2025).

National discussion illuminates Rivers predicament. Rivers' state dynamics mirror concerns about political abuse of state institutions, democratic pluralism, and authoritarianism. These difficulties suggest democratic vulnerabilities in Nigeria's Fourth Republic's Rivers Issue (ThisDay, 2025).

Institutional Weakness and Anti-Corruption Challenges

Chatham House examines institutional inadequacies that enable governmental control and democratic breakdown. Nigeria's anti-corruption reform has advanced over the past 25 years, but partisan campaigning, limited institutionalisation, and unequal accountability have hampered progress. Political favouritism and impunity hinder policy implementation and accountability (Chatham House, 2025).

The report highlights institutional failures: weak enforcement, politicised anti-corruption agencies, and double duty. Powerful people theoretically promote good government, ethical leadership, and self-sacrifice because citizens want better governance and a fairer society. Participating in religious, ethnic, professional, court, and media life gives them stature. Yet corruption prevails. Fraud claims reinforce the perception that corruption is ubiquitous and inevitable, giving Nigerians little hope of punishment (Chatham House, 2025).

Research shows reform possibilities. Nigeria's Supreme Court's local government autonomy verdict may promote bottom-up accountability. The Supreme Court of Nigeria (2024) ordered Nigeria's 774 local councils to set priorities, manage funds, and fulfil constitutional tasks instead of state governors. Local anti-corruption and transparency coalitions can collaborate with this power transition (Chatham House, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining three complementary perspectives:

State Capture Theory provides a thorough framework for analysing how political elites weaken democratic institutions to favour private interests over public goals (Hellman, Jones, & Kaufmann, 2000). This perspective emphasises how institutions can be taken over, by weaponising legislatures, compromising judiciaries, utilising federal power, and manipulating electoral processes (Transparency International, 2024). Nwozor et al.'s (2021) concept of elective dictatorship provides important perspectives on how democratic processes can be compromised internally.

Godfatherism Theory explores the complex interactions of elite political behaviour in Nigeria, emphasising the role of informal power networks based on patron-client relationships in influencing political competition and generating accountability deficits (JOMBO, 2025). This framework clarifies the reasons why elected officials often prioritise the interests of political benefactors over those of their constituents (UMUNNA, 2025). JOMBO's (2025) analysis of the interplay between patronage, godfatherism, and executive-legislative conflicts provides important perspectives on how these factors support and strengthen one another.

UMUNNA's (2025) examination of legal and ethical issues surrounding godfatherism illuminates the constitutional dimensions of this phenomenon.

Institutional Theory provides analytical tools for understanding the functioning (or dysfunction) of formal democratic institutions under extended elite pressure (Huntington, 1991). This perspective emphasises the importance of institutional autonomy, the rule of law, and the separation of powers in upholding democratic governance (Ibrahim, 2024). The Chatham House study on institutional trust and anti-corruption challenges offers a strong basis for understanding how institutional weakness influences citizens' perceptions and behaviours (Chatham House, 2025).

These frameworks together enable a thorough examination of the Rivers State crisis, focusing on the broader dynamics of state capture, the intermediate operations of godfather politics, and the individual effects on institutional performance and public trust.

Methodology

This study utilises a qualitative approach focused on document analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this research as it seeks to understand complex social and political phenomena, state capture, institutional erosion, and public trust through the interpretation of textual and documentary evidence. Creswell (2014) argues that qualitative research is well-suited for exploring and understanding the meanings that individuals or groups assign to social issues. This research employs a case study approach, focusing on Rivers State as a notable instance of state capture in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Yin (2018) defines a case study as an empirical investigation that examines a modern phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context. Rivers State exemplifies the analysis of state capture mechanisms, the erosion of democratic institutions, and the slow deterioration of public trust in the context of prolonged elite political conflicts. This case study framework employs solely secondary data sources, such as existing documents, reports, academic literature, media accounts, and archival materials, to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the Rivers State crisis and its impact on democratic governance.

Conclusion

Rivers State conflict is key to Nigerian democracy. It shows the Fourth Republic's 25-year structural pathologies, godfatherism, institution subversion, public trust degradation, and political elites' propensity to sacrifice community well-being for personal ambition. However, the crisis might revive democracy. The Chatham House report shows Nigerians desire fairness and accountability. Historic precedents suggest civic coalition-building may change politics. Nigerians' empathy and social duty drive collective action against government control.

For Odiaka (2026), "Nigeria will not improve by self-deception. Nigerians will remain locked until they reject any political arrangement that threatens democracy." The Rivers crisis is a warning and an opportunity to reform Nigerian democracy and create a people-centered political system.

All stakeholders must act: constitutional and legal reforms that close state capture loopholes; institutional strengthening that protects democratic bodies from political pressure; civic mobilisation that holds leaders accountable; political commitment to democratic principles;

and international support that strengthens democratic norms. Rivers State inhabitants deserve better than continuous crisis. Nearly 9.8 million people held hostage by elite brinkmanship need proper governance. Nigeria needs democracy-preserving leaders. Political leaders, civic society, and ordinary citizens must decide whether to remain passive victims of state rule or active agents of democratic regeneration in the coming months and years.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion, the study offers the following recommendations addressed to various stakeholders:

1. Strengthen Constitutional Provisions Against State Capture: The National Assembly should examine constitutional amendments banning godfatherism and private political arrangements that undermine democracy.

2. Reform Impeachment Procedures: Amending the Constitution would improve impeachment procedures and prevent political vendettas. The legislature should be automatically dissolved if it engages in frivolous impeachment attempts, have a higher bar of proof for commencing impeachment, have independent judicial monitoring of impeachment hearings, and have timelines that discourage hasty processes.

3. Clarify Emergency Powers: Section 305 of the 1999 Constitution should be revised to clarify state of emergency requirements, with a focus on subnational contexts. The reforms should specifically ban suspending elected officials or dissolving democratic institutions and necessitate independent judicial scrutiny of emergency declarations.

4. Strengthen Local Government Autonomy: The Supreme Court's local government autonomy ruling should be fully enforced with legislative support to prevent state governors from influencing local councils. Autonomous local governments can counter state capture and enable grassroots democracy.

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