

Corruption and The “Crisis of Legitimacy”: A Social Contract Analysis of Nigerian Governance

Kevin Ibok Anweting¹, Anthony Ogar²

Abstract— Nigeria’s persistent struggle with corruption, governance deficits, and insecurity is frequently described as a crisis of legitimacy. This paper argues that the core of this crisis is a failure of the social contract and systematically analyses which social contract theory, Hobbesian, Lockean, or Rousseauian, best diagnoses the problem and offers a normative framework for reconstruction. Drawing on a comparative philosophical analysis of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, alongside contemporary scholarship on Nigerian governance, the paper demonstrates that each theorist illuminates distinct dimensions of Nigeria’s legitimacy deficit. The paper argues that a reconstructed social contract must integrate Hobbesian attention to security, Lockean commitment to rights, and Rousseauian emphasis on participation, while being adapted to Nigeria’s communitarian traditions through an Afro-communitarian framework. The paper concludes that Nigeria requires a renegotiated social contract grounded in security, rights protection, participatory governance, and communal values, transforming the relationship between citizens and the state from one of coercion and alienation to one of trust, accountability, and shared flourishing.

Keywords: Social contract, Corruption; Legitimacy crisis; Nigerian governance; Afro-communitarianism.

¹Department of Philosophy Veritas University, Abuja, Nigeria. Email: anwetingk@veritas.edu.ng

²Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Nigeria/ Email: ogartony88@gmail.com

© 2026 the Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0).

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of its largest economies, presents a paradox. Since its return to democratic rule in 1999, the country has enjoyed uninterrupted civilian administration, yet it continues to grapple with a crisis of legitimacy that pervades its political institutions and undermines the relationship between citizens and the state. Corruption remains endemic, with Nigeria scoring 26 out of 100 on Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index, ranking 142nd out of 182 countries assessed (Transparency International, 2025). Insecurity has become a defining feature of contemporary life, with terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence afflicting communities across the federation (Asuquo et al., 2025). Public trust in state institutions has eroded to alarming levels, with survey evidence indicating that 46 per cent of Nigerians greatly distrust the police, while 36 and 35 per cent respectively greatly distrust the presidency and the federal government (Chatham House & National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). This constellation of challenges has led scholars and commentators to describe Nigeria as experiencing a crisis of legitimacy (Idoko, 2026; Adedeji & Jacob, 2026).

This paper argues that the crisis of legitimacy in Nigeria is fundamentally a failure of the social contract. The social contract tradition, articulated most influentially by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, posits that political authority derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed and is conditional upon the state's fulfilment of its obligations to citizens. When the state fails to provide security, protect rights, or promote the common good, the social contract is breached, and the legitimacy of political authority is called into question. The paper asks: which social contract theory best diagnoses the Nigerian predicament, and what normative resources does each offer for reconstruction?

The significance of this inquiry lies in its contribution to three bodies of scholarship. First, it contributes to the growing literature on social contract theory in African political philosophy, which has often been dominated by Western-centric analyses that neglect the communitarian dimensions of African social and political thought (Chemhuru, 2017; Hellsten, 2009). Second, it contributes to the empirical literature on Nigerian governance by providing a systematic philosophical framework for interpreting the country's legitimacy deficit. Third, it contributes to normative political theory by demonstrating how social contract frameworks can be adapted to non-Western contexts without sacrificing their critical edge.

The paper proceeds as follows. The literature review examines existing scholarship on social contract theory and Nigerian governance. The theoretical framework outlines the key concepts and the comparative methodology employed. The analysis examines Nigeria through each of the three social contract lenses. The synthesis section evaluates the relative strengths and limitations of each framework and proposes

an Afro-communitarian adaptation. The conclusion reflects on the implications for democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Contract Theory: Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau

The social contract tradition emerged as a response to the political crises of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, offering a secular justification for political authority grounded in the consent of the governed rather than divine right. Thomas Hobbes, writing during the English Civil War, argued that the state of nature, a condition of radical equality and perpetual insecurity, renders life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, 1996, p. 13). To escape this condition, rational individuals authorise an absolute sovereign to maintain order, surrendering their natural liberties in exchange for security. For Hobbes, legal obligation is nearly absolute because disobedience threatens the very foundation of civil society (Hobbes, 1996).

John Locke offered a markedly different account. While accepting the social contract framework, Locke argued that government exists to protect natural rights, namely life, liberty, and property, which exist prior to political institutions. Legitimate political authority depends upon the consent of the governed, and when governments violate natural rights or govern arbitrarily, they breach the social contract and forfeit their legitimacy (Locke, 1988). Locke’s theory thus makes legal obligation conditional upon governmental legitimacy and provides a normative basis for resistance to tyranny.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau transformed the social contract tradition by arguing that genuine freedom is achieved through participation in collective self-government. Individuals unite under the general will, which represents the common good rather than the private interests of individuals or groups. Laws express collective self-government, and obedience to law becomes obedience to one’s own rational will as a member of the political community (Rousseau, 1968). Rousseau’s theory has been particularly influential in democratic theory because it grounds legitimacy not merely in consent but in active citizen participation.

Social Contract Theory and Nigerian Governance

Recent scholarship has increasingly turned to social contract theory to analyse Nigeria’s governance challenges. Asuquo et al. (2025) employ a Hobbesian framework to examine freedom and security in Nigeria, arguing that the government’s inability to safeguard lives and property constitutes a fundamental breach of the social contract. Nwadiolu (2025) applies Locke’s political theory to assess Nigerian democracy, concluding that the abuse of political power and the erosion of democratic values stem from politicians’ consistent violation of Lockean principles centred on consent and accountability. Idoko (2026) deploys Rousseau’s social contract theory to analyse citizen

participation and state legitimacy, arguing that political corruption and weak civic participation undermine the legitimacy of the Nigerian state.

Other scholars have examined specific dimensions of the social contract in Nigeria. Nzeribe (2025) examines the relationship between political stability, security, and sustainable development, revealing that despite stable political transitions since 1999, security and development have eluded the country, thereby undermining the social contract. Ugwukwu (2026) applies a Hobbesian lens to governance and insecurity, finding that the Nigerian government's inability to operate as a Leviathan has resulted in a strained social contract reflected in the widening divide between the state and its people. Adedeji and Jacob (2026) examine the shift from post-colonial optimism to developmental crisis, demonstrating how elite-driven governance has eroded public confidence and trust in state institutions.

Adebanwi and Obadare (2011) provide a critical analysis of Nigeria's anti-corruption war between 1999 and 2008, demonstrating that in democratising contexts like Nigeria, the gravest threats to anti-corruption campaigns often emanate from intra-elite rancour and political intrigue. Their study offers valuable insights into why anti-corruption efforts, when not backed by radical institutional reforms, fall prey to the endemic systemic crisis that necessitated them in the first place. This analysis is particularly relevant to the social contract framework because it shows how elite capture undermines the state's capacity to fulfil its obligations to citizens.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, several gaps remain. Most studies apply a single theorist in isolation, without systematically comparing the relative explanatory power of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau for the Nigerian context. Furthermore, the literature has not adequately engaged with the critique that Western social contract ideals clash with Nigeria's communitarian traditions. Finally, the normative question of what a reconstructed social contract might look like in the Nigerian context remains under-theorised. This paper addresses these gaps by providing a comparative, synthetic analysis that engages with Afro-communitarian critiques and proposes a framework for reconstruction.

Afro-Communitarianism and the Social Contract

The social contract tradition has been criticised for its individualist assumptions, which appear to clash with the communitarian ethos of many African societies. Chemhuru (2017) argues that African communitarian philosophy offers a distinctive conception of the social contract that prioritises communal harmony and shared flourishing over individual rights. In African communitarianism, personhood is formed within community rather than through isolated individual choice; the self is relational rather than atomistic (Mbiti, 1969). This perspective stands in opposition to modern

social contracts, which centre around the individual rather than the community (Reimagining the Social Contract, 2023).

Ifeanyi Menkiti's influential essay "Person and Community in African Thought" provides a foundational articulation of this communitarian perspective. Menkiti argues that personhood is not an inherent quality but an ontological progression toward moral maturity, where communal norms and responsibilities shape one's identity (Menkiti, 1984). For Menkiti, personhood is ontologically and normatively prior to citizenship; the community is not a collection of self-interested individuals but a fused collective "we" (Menkiti, 2018). This conception of personhood has profound implications for social contract theory because it challenges the atomistic premise upon which Western social contract thinking rests. If persons are constituted through community rather than existing prior to it, then the social contract cannot be understood as an agreement between pre-social individuals but must be conceived as an expression of communal self-determination.

Kwame Gyekye, while sharing Menkiti's communitarian orientation, offers a more moderate position. Gyekye (1997) acknowledges an inherent baseline of personhood that is augmented through communal practices, and he critiques exclusionary views that deny moral status to children. He argues that the Akan proverb "a person is not a palm tree to survive alone" captures the interdependence that characterises African communitarian thought. Gyekye's moderate communitarianism recognises both the social nature of persons and their individual rights, offering a framework that is compatible with constitutional democracy while remaining grounded in African cultural values.

Kwame Anthony Appiah contributes to this debate through his concept of rooted cosmopolitanism. Appiah (2006) argues that individuals can maintain their cultural particularity while engaging with universal values and obligations to strangers. His cosmopolitanism is not a denial of communal belonging but an extension of it; rooted cosmopolitans are attached to their own cultural communities while recognising the humanity of those beyond their borders. This perspective is valuable for thinking about a reconstructed social contract in Nigeria because it suggests that communal loyalties and universal rights need not be in opposition. A social contract that respects cultural particularity while upholding universal human rights is not a contradiction but a form of rooted cosmopolitanism.

Hellsten (2009) examines the shortcomings and possibilities of the social contract approach in post-colonial Africa, arguing that communitarian and communal traditions are tangled with individualist market rationality in fragile, patrimonial states. She contends that if sustainable peace, social reconstruction, and national unity are to be achieved, there is a need for an adequate understanding of the moral dimensions of

social justice and a focus on building an impartial state with strong, ethnically and politically neutral institutions.

However, the Afro-communitarian critique of Western social contract theory is not without its own problems. Matolino (2014) argues that the insistence by African communitarians on communal ends over individual interests can lead to situations where the rights and claims of individuals are trampled upon. Hard communitarianism, with its emphasis on shared values and communal obligations, may be incompatible with the pluralism of modern African societies. Nevertheless, the communitarian emphasis on relational personhood and shared flourishing offers valuable resources for reimagining the social contract in ways that are culturally grounded and normatively compelling.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a comparative philosophical methodology, examining Nigeria's legitimacy crisis through the lenses of Hobbesian, Lockean, and Rousseauian social contract theory. The framework rests on three analytical dimensions corresponding to the core concerns of each theorist: security (Hobbes), rights (Locke), and participation (Rousseau).

The Hobbesian dimension focuses on the state's capacity to provide security and maintain order. For Hobbes, the primary purpose of government is the preservation of peace; citizens surrender their natural liberties in exchange for protection. When the state fails to provide security, it fails in its fundamental purpose, and the legitimacy of political authority is called into question (Hobbes, 1996; Asuquo et al., 2025).

The Lockean dimension focuses on the protection of natural rights and the preservation of consent. For Locke, government exists to protect life, liberty, and property; when it violates these rights, it breaches the social contract and forfeits its legitimacy. Legal obligation is therefore conditional upon governmental legitimacy (Locke, 1988; Nwadiolu, 2025).

The Rousseauian dimension focuses on citizen participation and the realisation of the general will. For Rousseau, legitimate authority derives not merely from consent but from continual alignment with the general will, which represents the common good. When government officials prioritise private over collective interests, the general will is systematically obstructed, and civil freedom is compromised (Rousseau, 1968; Idoko, 2026).

These three dimensions are not mutually exclusive; they illuminate different aspects of the same underlying problem. Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for diagnosing Nigeria's legitimacy crisis and for imagining pathways toward reconstruction.

ANALYSIS: NIGERIA THROUGH THREE SOCIAL CONTRACT LENSES

The Hobbesian Lens: Security and the Failure of the Sovereign

Thomas Hobbes's political philosophy is grounded in a vivid depiction of the state of nature, a condition of radical insecurity in which every individual is a potential threat to every other. To escape this condition, rational individuals authorise an absolute sovereign whose primary function is the preservation of peace and security. The legitimacy of political authority, for Hobbes, is inextricably linked to the sovereign's capacity to fulfil this function (Hobbes, 1996).

Nigeria's contemporary security landscape presents a troubling picture through the Hobbesian lens. The country has witnessed an escalation of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, herder-farmer conflicts, and communal violence that has made insecurity a defining feature of daily life for millions of citizens (Asuquo et al., 2025). The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009, has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions in the Northeast. Banditry in the Northwest has led to mass kidnappings of schoolchildren and widespread rural insecurity. In the Southeast, unknown gunmen have perpetrated violent crimes and kidnapping incidents, contributing to a sense of lawlessness. The Middle Belt has experienced recurring communal violence, often framed in ethno-religious terms.

The Nigerian state's inability to provide security, the most fundamental obligation of the Hobbesian sovereign, constitutes a fundamental breach of the social contract. As Ugwukwu (2026) argues, the pervasive insecurity indicates a breakdown in legitimacy and authority. The state's failure to operate as a Hobbesian Leviathan is caused by deficiencies in governance, corruption, and institutional weakness. Citizens' trust in the state has declined, leading to the emergence of self-help mechanisms and non-state security actors, including vigilante groups and ethnic militias. This proliferation of non-state security actors is itself a symptom of the social contract's breakdown; when the sovereign cannot protect, citizens turn to alternative sources of security, further eroding the state's legitimacy.

The Hobbesian lens also illuminates the relationship between security and legitimacy. Hobbes argued that the sovereign must possess sufficient power to maintain order; a weak sovereign invites the return of the state of nature. Nigeria's security forces are large and well-funded, yet they have proven unable to stem the tide of violence. This is not merely a matter of resources; it reflects deeper deficiencies in governance, accountability, and the rule of law. The security forces themselves have been implicated in human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and torture, further eroding public trust (Human Rights Watch, 2021). When the agents of state security become sources of insecurity, the Hobbesian contract is doubly breached.

The Lockean Lens: Rights, Consent, and the Failure of Government

John Locke's social contract theory differs from Hobbes's in its emphasis on natural rights and limited government. For Locke, individuals in the state of nature possess rights to life, liberty, and property, and reason teaches that these rights should be respected. Government is established to protect these rights more effectively than individuals could in the state of nature. When governments violate natural rights or govern arbitrarily, they breach the social contract and forfeit their legitimacy (Locke, 1988).

Nigeria's governance record presents significant challenges through the Lockean lens. The 1999 Constitution, which serves as Nigeria's social contract, guarantees fundamental rights including the right to life, personal liberty, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom from discrimination (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Yet these constitutional guarantees have often been honoured more in the breach than in the observance. The #EndSARS protests of 2020, which began as a movement against police brutality and extrajudicial killings by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, exemplified the disconnect between constitutional rights and lived reality (Aghedo & Eke, 2021). The Nigerian government's response to the protests, including the shooting of peaceful demonstrators at the Lekki Toll Gate, further underscored the state's willingness to employ violence against citizens asserting their rights.

Corruption represents a particularly insidious violation of the Lockean contract. Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Nigeria 142nd out of 182 countries, with a score of 26 out of 100, well below the sub-Saharan African average of 33 (Transparency International, 2025). Corruption undermines the state's ability to protect rights by diverting resources from public goods and by subverting the rule of law. When politically connected individuals escape accountability while ordinary citizens face strict punishment, the principle of equality before the law is compromised. The selective enforcement of laws violates the Lockean principle that government exists to protect the rights of all citizens equally.

Adebanwi and Obadare (2011) demonstrate that in democratising contexts like Nigeria, the gravest threats to anti-corruption campaigns often emanate from a combination of intra-elite rancour and political intrigue. Their analysis shows that when corruption fights back, anti-corruption efforts that are not backed by other radical institutional reforms fall prey to the overall endemic crisis. This finding underscores the depth of the Lockean breach in Nigeria: not only does corruption violate rights, but efforts to address corruption are themselves subverted by the same elite interests that benefit from the breach.

The Lockean lens also illuminates the problem of consent and political legitimacy. Locke argued that legitimate political authority depends upon the consent

of the governed. In Nigeria, however, electoral malpractice, voter intimidation, and the manipulation of electoral outcomes have undermined the integrity of the electoral process. Survey evidence consistently points to low levels of trust in political parties, reinforcing patterns of voter apathy and declining turnout (Africa Polling Institute, 2025). When citizens perceive that their consent is not meaningfully sought or respected, the legitimacy of political authority is called into question.

The Rousseauian Lens: The General Will and Civic Exclusion

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract theory provides a distinctive perspective on legitimacy by grounding it not merely in consent but in continual alignment with the general will. For Rousseau, legitimate authority derives from the people's collective self-government; laws must express the common good rather than the private interests of individuals or groups. When government officials prioritise private over collective interests, the general will is systematically obstructed, and civil freedom is compromised (Rousseau, 1968).

Nigeria's governance challenges appear particularly acute through the Rousseauian lens. The country's political system is characterised by what scholars describe as prebendal politics, a system in which state resources are captured by elites for private enrichment rather than deployed for public benefit (Joseph, 1987). Idoko (2026) argues that governance in Nigeria is punctuated by a systemic disconnect between the ruling class and the populace, resulting in persistent legitimacy crisis and political apathy. The political elite has fostered widespread apathy among citizens by prioritising private accumulation over collective welfare.

The Rousseauian concept of the general will also highlights the problem of civic exclusion. Rousseau emphasised that citizens must be active participants in the formulation of laws to exercise civil freedom fully (Rousseau, 1968). In Nigeria, however, political participation is often reduced to periodic voting in elections that are widely perceived as neither free nor fair. The weak institutionalisation of political parties, characterised by fluid alliances, frequent defections, and factional rivalries rooted in patronage networks, undermines citizens' confidence in electoral competition as a meaningful avenue for political change (Madueke, 2026). This legitimacy deficit weakens the social contract between citizens and the state, making compliance with political authority more contingent and fragile.

The 2020 #EndSARS protests exemplified the erosion of the Rousseauian contract. Although initially focused on police brutality, the movement quickly articulated broader demands for accountability and governance reform (Aghedo & Eke, 2021). The protests reflected citizens' frustration with a political system that seemed unresponsive to their needs and aspirations. When the government responded with

force rather than dialogue, it further alienated citizens from the political process, deepening the legitimacy crisis.

However, applying Rousseau's theory to Nigeria raises a significant challenge: the difficulty of defining the general will in a pluralistic society. As Hung (2022) notes, Rousseau's general will has been criticised for failing to acknowledge the fact of pluralism and for potentially inducing homogenising tyranny. Rousseau presupposed a relatively unified polity, but Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity complicates the pursuit of a common purpose. The assumption of a unified will among citizens contrasts sharply with Nigeria's reality, where ethnic and religious divisions often shape political allegiances. This raises the question of whether Rousseau's framework is adequate for understanding legitimacy in deeply divided societies. Nevertheless, the Rousseauian emphasis on participation, deliberation, and the common good remains valuable for diagnosing Nigeria's governance deficits, provided it is adapted to accommodate pluralism.

SYNTHESIS AND CRITIQUE: TOWARD A RECONSTRUCTED SOCIAL CONTRACT

Comparative Evaluation of the Three Lenses

Each of the three social contract frameworks illuminates distinct dimensions of Nigeria's legitimacy crisis. The Hobbesian lens highlights the state's failure to provide security, revealing how the proliferation of non-state security actors and the persistence of violence undermine the sovereign's legitimacy. The Lockean lens exposes the violation of natural rights and the erosion of consent, revealing how corruption, human rights abuses, and electoral malpractice breach the social contract. The Rousseauian lens identifies the systematic obstruction of the general will through elite capture and civic exclusion, revealing how the disconnect between rulers and ruled erodes political legitimacy.

The three frameworks are complementary rather than competing. Hobbes provides the most compelling diagnosis of Nigeria's security crisis, but his prescription of absolute sovereignty is inadequate for addressing the deeper problems of accountability and participation. Locke provides a robust account of rights and resistance, but his emphasis on individual property rights may not fully resonate in a context where communal forms of ownership and social solidarity remain strong. Rousseau provides the most demanding standard of legitimacy, one that requires active citizen participation and genuine responsiveness to the common good, but his assumption of a unified polity is problematic in Nigeria's pluralistic context.

A comprehensive analysis requires integrating insights from all three traditions while remaining attentive to their limitations. Hobbes reminds us that security is the foundation of political order; without it, all other goods are precarious. Locke reminds

us that rights are not privileges granted by the state but entitlements that the state exists to protect. Rousseau reminds us that legitimacy requires not merely consent but active participation and responsiveness to the common good.

Afro-Communitarian Adaptation

The Western social contract tradition, with its emphasis on individual rights and atomistic consent, has been criticised for its inadequate engagement with communal values that are central to many African societies. Chemhuru (2017) argues that African communitarian philosophy offers a distinctive conception of the social contract that prioritises communal harmony and shared flourishing. In African communitarianism, personhood is formed within community; the self is relational rather than atomistic (Mbiti, 1969). This perspective stands in opposition to modern social contracts, which centre around the individual rather than the community (Reimagining the Social Contract, 2023).

Ifeanyi Menkiti's conception of personhood as an ontological progression toward moral maturity provides a particularly valuable resource for this adaptation. Menkiti (1984) argues that personhood is not an inherent quality but is achieved through ethical engagement, social participation, and adherence to cultural norms. This means that the social contract cannot be understood as an agreement between pre-social individuals; it must be conceived as an expression of communal self-determination in which persons are constituted through their relationships with others. Menkiti's insight that personhood is ontologically and normatively prior to citizenship (Menkiti, 2018) challenges the Lockean premise that individuals possess rights prior to political society. In an Afro-communitarian framework, rights are not pre-social entitlements but are recognised and protected through communal institutions.

Kwame Gyekye's moderate communitarianism offers a corrective to the potential excesses of hard communitarianism. Gyekye (1997) acknowledges an inherent baseline of personhood that is augmented through communal practices, and he argues that individual rights and communal obligations are not necessarily in conflict. His approach suggests that an Afro-communitarian social contract need not sacrifice individual rights on the altar of communal solidarity. Instead, it can recognise both the social nature of persons and their individual dignity, creating a framework that is compatible with constitutional democracy while remaining grounded in African cultural values.

Kwame Anthony Appiah's concept of rooted cosmopolitanism provides a further resource for thinking about a reconstructed social contract in Nigeria. Appiah (2006) argues that individuals can maintain their cultural particularity while recognising obligations to those beyond their immediate community. His cosmopolitanism is not a denial of communal belonging but an extension of it; rooted cosmopolitans are attached

to their own cultural communities while recognising the humanity of strangers. This perspective is valuable for Nigeria because it suggests that communal loyalties and universal rights need not be in opposition. A social contract that respects ethnic and religious particularity while upholding universal human rights is not a contradiction but a form of rooted cosmopolitanism.

An Afro-communitarian adaptation of social contract theory would retain the core insight that political authority derives from the consent of the governed and is conditional upon the state's fulfilment of its obligations. However, it would expand the conception of those obligations to include not only individual rights protection but also the promotion of communal flourishing and the preservation of social harmony. The state would be understood not merely as a guarantor of individual rights but as a custodian of the common good, with corresponding responsibilities to ensure that the benefits of political association are shared equitably among all communities.

This adaptation also has implications for the understanding of political obligation. In the Western tradition, obligation is often framed in terms of individual consent. In an Afro-communitarian framework, obligation would be understood relationally: citizens are obligated to obey the law because they are members of a community that has collectively constituted political authority, and because the law is an expression of their collective will. As Gyekye (1997) argues, the Akan proverb "a person is not a palm tree to survive alone" captures the interdependence that characterises African communitarian thought. This does not eliminate individual rights but situates them within a broader framework of communal responsibility.

Toward a Reconstructed Social Contract in Nigeria

A reconstructed social contract for Nigeria must address the failures identified through the three lenses. First, it must restore the state's capacity to provide security, not merely through military force but through a comprehensive approach to governance that addresses the root causes of insecurity, including poverty, inequality, and marginalisation. Second, it must protect and respect fundamental rights, holding public officials accountable for violations and ensuring equal application of the law. Third, it must genuinely involve citizens in governance, transforming the relationship between rulers and ruled from one of coercion and alienation to one of trust, accountability, and shared responsibility.

This reconstruction requires institutional reforms, including strengthening the rule of law, enhancing judicial independence, and building effective anti-corruption mechanisms. As Adebawale and Obadare (2011) demonstrate, anti-corruption efforts that are not backed by radical institutional reforms fall prey to the endemic systemic crisis. This means that addressing corruption requires not merely prosecuting individual offenders but transforming the institutional environment that enables

corruption to flourish. It also requires a cultural shift, a reorientation of political ethics away from patrimonialism and toward public service, and a reimagining of citizenship as active participation rather than passive acquiescence. As Idoko (2026) recommends, the reconstruction of Nigeria's social contract requires deliberate efforts toward participatory governance, civic reorientation, and institutional accountability.

The Afro-communitarian perspective offers valuable resources for this reconstruction. By emphasising communal harmony, shared flourishing, and relational personhood, it provides a normative vision of political community that resonates with Nigerian cultural traditions. It also offers a corrective to the excessive individualism of Western social contract theory, reminding us that political legitimacy is not merely a matter of individual consent but of collective flourishing. Menkiti's conception of personhood as achieved through communal engagement suggests that citizenship is not merely a legal status but a practice of ethical participation in the life of the community. Gyekye's moderate communitarianism shows that individual rights and communal obligations can be reconciled. Appiah's rooted cosmopolitanism demonstrates that cultural particularity and universal values can coexist.

A reconstructed social contract for Nigeria would thus be grounded in four pillars: security, rights, participation, and community. It would recognise that without security, no other goods are possible; that rights are entitlements that the state exists to protect; that participation is essential to legitimate governance; and that community is not a constraint on individual freedom but its condition. Such a contract would transform the relationship between citizens and the state from one of alienation and distrust to one of mutual obligation and shared purpose.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Nigeria's legitimacy crisis through the lenses of Hobbesian, Lockean, and Rousseauian social contract theory. Each framework illuminates distinct dimensions of the crisis: Hobbes exposes the state's failure to provide security, Locke reveals the violation of natural rights and the erosion of consent, and Rousseau identifies the systematic obstruction of the general will through elite capture and civic exclusion. Taken together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive diagnosis of Nigeria's governance deficits and a normative foundation for reconstruction.

The paper has argued that a reconstructed social contract for Nigeria must be grounded in security, rights protection, participatory governance, and communal values. It must address the material conditions that give rise to insecurity and inequality, protect fundamental rights through accountable institutions, and genuinely involve citizens in the decisions that affect their lives. It must also draw on Nigeria's

communitarian traditions to develop a conception of political community that prioritises shared flourishing over individual accumulation.

The contributions of Afro-communitarian thinkers are particularly valuable in this regard. Menkiti's conception of personhood as an ontological progression toward moral maturity challenges the atomistic premises of Western social contract theory and offers a vision of political community in which persons are constituted through their relationships with others. Gyekye's moderate communitarianism demonstrates that individual rights and communal obligations can be reconciled, providing a framework compatible with constitutional democracy. Appiah's rooted cosmopolitanism shows that cultural particularity and universal values need not be in opposition.

The implications for democratic consolidation in Nigeria are significant. A social contract that is not grounded in security, rights, and participation cannot command the enduring allegiance of citizens. Conversely, a social contract that genuinely serves the common good can transform the relationship between citizens and the state from one of alienation and distrust to one of mutual obligation and shared purpose. The task of reconstruction is daunting, but the resources of the social contract tradition, adapted to the Nigerian context and enriched by Afro-communitarian insights, provide a normative compass for the journey.

REFERENCES

- Adebanwi, W., & Obadare, E. (2011). When corruption fights back: Democracy and elite interest in Nigeria's anti-corruption war. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 49(2), 185–213. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X11000024>
- Adedeji, A. O., & Jacob, J. N. (2026). From post-colonial optimism to developmental crisis: Governance failure, state capacity, and the Awolowo developmental framework in Nigeria. *ESUT Journal of Social Sciences*, 11(2). <https://www.esutjss.com/index.php/ESUTJSS/article/view/364>
- Africa Polling Institute. (2025). *Social cohesion report 2025*. Africa Polling Institute.
- Aghedo, I., & Eke, S. (2021). State repression and political dissent in Nigeria: A case study of the #EndSARS movement. *Journal of African Politics*, 19(4), 233–255.
- Appiah, K. A. (2006). *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*. W. W. Norton.
- Asuquo, G., Daramola, I. O., Oluwatobi, O. K., & Adam, H. A. (2025). Freedom and security in Nigeria: A Hobbesian inquiry into the role of the state. *Journal of Political Science and International Relationship*, 2(1), 101–108. <https://doi.org/10.54536/jpsir.v2i1.5795>
- Chatham House & National Bureau of Statistics. (2025). *Taking action against corruption in Nigeria: A crisis of trust: Results from the fourth national household survey*. Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/taking-action-against-corruption-nigeria/03-crisis-trust-results-fourth-national-household>

- Chemhuru, M. (2017). Gleaning the social contract theory from African communitarian philosophy. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 36(4), 505–515. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2017.1359470>
- Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended).
- Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford University Press.
- Hellsten, S. (2009). Afro-Libertarianism and the Social Contract Framework in Post-Colonial Africa: The Case of Post-2007 Elections Kenya. *Thought and Practice*, 1(1), 127-150.
- Hobbes, T. (1996). *Leviathan* (R. Tuck, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. (2021). *Nigeria: Events of 2021*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/nigeria>
- Hung, A. T. W. (2022). Taylor and Rousseau on republican freedom and political fragmentation. *The European Legacy*, 27(6), 591–609.
- Idoko, B. O. (2026). The social contract and the crisis of governance in Nigeria: A Rousseauian analysis of citizen participation and state legitimacy. *Nigerian Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 6(1).
- Joseph, R. A. (1987). *Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, J. (1988). *Two treatises of government* (P. Laslett, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Madueke, O. J. (2026). Weak parties, strong elites: Political institutionalisation and democratic fragility in Nigeria. *African Identities*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14725843.2026.2657558>
- Matolino, B. (2014). *Personhood in African philosophy*. Cluster Publications.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Heinemann.
- Menkiti, I. A. (1984). Person and community in African traditional thought. In R. A. Wright (Ed.), *African philosophy: An introduction* (3rd ed., pp. 171–181). University Press of America.
- Menkiti, I. A. (2018). Person and community: A retrospective statement. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, 7(2), 1–12.
- Nwadiolu, L. C. (2025). An Assessment of Nigeria's Democracy through the Lens of John Locke's Political Thought. *Advances in Law, Pedagogy, and Multidisciplinary Humanities*, 3(2), 363-375.
- Nzeribe, S. A. (2025). Political Stability, Security and Sustainable Development in Nigeria, 1999-2023: The Praxis. *Journal of Policy and Development Studies*, 19(3), 251-268.
- Reimagining the social contract: An African perspective. (2023, December 29). *EcoSocial Contract*. <https://www.ecosocialcontract.net/>
- Rousseau, J. J. (1968). *The social contract* (M. Cranston, Trans.). Penguin Books.

- Transparency International. (2025). *Corruption perceptions index 2025*. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2025>
- Ugwukwu, V. O. (2026). The social contract under strain: A Hobbesian analysis of governance and insecurity in Nigeria. *NOUN-NIJPPL International Journal of Private and Property Law*, 1(1). <https://nijppl.nou.edu.ng/index.php/nijppl/article/view/17>