

An Assessment of Nigeria's Democracy through the Lens of John Locke's Political Thought

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Abstract— *The quest for power is an inherent part of human inclination and existence. As a societal and political being, man seeks and exercises this power within his society. Once power is sought and legitimately invested by the people, those in authority often exercise it in an egocentric manner. Consequently, there is a tendency for this power to be abused. The abuse of political power in Nigeria is a deeply entrenched issue, rooted in a legacy of authoritarianism, corruption, and institutional fragility. This study investigates the phenomenon through John Locke's political theory, offering a critical reflection on the legitimacy and limits of authority in the Nigerian political context. Furthermore, Locke's principles, centred on the social contract, the consent of the governed, and the right to resist tyranny, provide a compelling framework for understanding the failures of governance and the erosion of democratic values. The study employs analytical methods to examine how Nigerian politicians consistently violate the foundational tenets of Locke's philosophy, exercising power without accountability and undermining the rule of law. The findings reveal a persistent disconnect between the governed and those in authority, resulting in systematic injustice and political instability. The study therefore concludes that Locke's theory is profoundly relevant to Nigeria's political evolution, offering not only a critique of current governance but also a pathway toward restoring legitimacy, empowering citizens, and transforming power into a force for justice and collective progress.*

Keywords: Abuse of power; political evolution; political instability; power; systematic injustice.

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INTRODUCTION

The abuse of power in Nigerian politics is not only a critical philosophical dilemma that raises fundamental questions about governance, authority, legitimacy, and justice, but also a fundamental obstacle to the realization of democratic governance (Maier, 2000). Despite the country's transition to democracy in 1999, political leaders continue to engage in practices such as corruption, electoral malpractice, suppression of dissent, and the manipulation of state institutions for personal or group interests. Osoba (2021) notes that while democratic governance is theoretically founded on principles of justice, accountability, and the protection of individual rights, the Nigerian political system has been plagued by corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and the subversion of democratic institutions (p. 45). These contradictions highlight the tension between political power and democratic ideals, making it imperative to analyze the problem through the lens of John Locke's political theory.

John Locke's social contract theory posits that legitimate political authority arises from the consent of the governed and must be exercised in a manner that promotes the common good (Locke, 1980, p. 330). Locke argues that individuals surrender certain freedoms to a government in exchange for the protection of their natural rights—life, liberty, and property. Ideally, this contract ensures that government operates within the limits of justice and rational governance (Simmons, 1993). However, in Nigeria, political power is often wielded as a tool for personal enrichment, oppression, and institutional control, rather than for the service of the people (Agbaje & Adebajo, 2022, p. 53).

A profound disparity exists between democratic principles and authoritarian realities in Nigerian politics. While Nigeria operates under a democratic system in theory, in practice, it exhibits characteristics of an oligarchy, where political elites manipulate electoral processes and state institutions to maintain power (Ojo, 2023, p. 67). This raises philosophical questions about the true nature of political authority. If authority is derived from the consent of the governed, yet electoral fraud, political intimidation, and institutionalized corruption persist, can Nigerian leaders truly claim to represent the people's will? (Omodia & Erameh, 2021, p. 29).

Locke emphasizes that a just government must protect individual freedoms while maintaining order (Locke, 1980, p. 287). However, in Nigeria, state power is frequently used to suppress dissent rather than ensure security. Political protests, such as the #EndSARS movement against police brutality, have been met with violent repression (Ajayi, 2023, p. 114; Human Rights Watch, 2020). This raises a deeper ethical question: at what point does state power become illegitimate, and what moral justification do citizens have for resisting oppressive governance? (Aghedo & Eke, 2021, p. 240). According to Locke, when a government becomes destructive to the rights of the people, they have the right to alter or abolish it (Locke, 1980, p. 413). This work,

therefore, explores the philosophical implications of resistance in the face of systemic oppression in Nigeria.

The failure of political representation and the rule of law in Nigeria further challenges the application of Locke's theories. The absence of a proper legal framework to safeguard citizens from abuses of power reflects a significant gap in the social contract, wherein the government fails to uphold its obligations to the people (Adebayo, 2023, p. 37). The lack of institutional integrity and the prevalence of electoral malpractices reveal a disconnection between the governed and their leaders, emphasizing the need for substantial reforms to restore public confidence in democratic processes (Eze, 2020, p. 35; Kew, 2010). This dissonance between Locke's theoretical framework and Nigerian governance highlights the inadequacies within the political system and calls for a re-evaluation of political practices to align them more closely with democratic ideals.

This work argues that the abuse of power in Nigerian politics fundamentally contradicts John Locke's political theory, particularly his concepts of the social contract, legitimacy, and justice. By examining how Nigerian governance deviates from Locke's democratic principles, this work seeks to demonstrate that political authority in Nigeria is often exercised in an illegitimate and unjust manner, leading to systemic corruption, suppression of rights, and political instability. The study ultimately explores the philosophical implications of resistance and the moral obligations of both rulers and citizens in addressing the abuse of power.

POWER AND POWER ABUSE IN THE NIGERIAN POLITICAL STRUCTURE

In political philosophy, power denotes the ability or capacity of an individual or group to influence or control the behaviour of others, particularly in political settings. It refers to the capacity to make decisions that affect the collective, enforce laws, command resources, and shape societal norms. Dahl (1957) defines power as the ability of A to get B to do something that B would not otherwise do (p. 202). Power is fundamental to governance, as it defines who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936). In democratic systems, power is ideally distributed across different arms of government to ensure checks and balances, while in autocratic systems, it is often centralized in one person or institution.

Abuse of power occurs when those entrusted with authority exceed the bounds of their mandate or use their position for personal gain or to oppress others. Such abuse undermines the principles of justice, accountability, and democratic governance. As Foucault (1980) explains, power becomes abusive when it is wielded not merely to govern but to dominate and manipulate (p. 121). In the Nigerian political context, abuse of power manifests in various forms, including corruption, impunity, electoral

manipulation, suppression of dissent, and the use of state apparatuses for personal or partisan ends (Smith, 2007).

There is no doubt that Nigeria's political structure has experienced systemic abuse of power, dating back to the post-independence period. During the First Republic (1960–1966), power was highly centralized in regional leaders who manipulated political structures for ethnic and personal advantages. This manipulation and perceived injustice contributed to the military coups of 1966, which began a long period of military dominance in Nigerian politics. Each military regime, from General Aguiyi Ironsi to General Sani Abacha, entrenched authoritarianism, suppressed civil liberties, and used coercive means to maintain order (Suberu, 2001, p. 87).

Military regimes redefined power not as a tool for collective development but as an instrument for personal enrichment and intimidation. Public institutions were politicized, and meritocracy was sacrificed in favour of favouritism and ethno-religious patronage. Diamond (1995) posits that military rulers perceived political power as a spoils system where loyalty was rewarded regardless of competence (p. 109). This legacy of impunity has endured into Nigeria's civilian regimes.

In the Fourth Republic, which began in 1999, the transition to democracy was expected to curtail the excesses of past governments. However, democratic institutions remained weak, and many elected officials continued to abuse power with little consequence. Political office became a means of accessing state resources, leading to endemic corruption (Joseph, 1987). The control of national wealth was concentrated in a few hands, and those who dared challenge the system were often marginalized or persecuted.

One notable area of power abuse in Nigeria's political structure is the executive arm of government. The presidency, in particular, has historically wielded disproportionate power over the legislature and judiciary. Although the Constitution provides for the separation of powers, in practice, the executive often interferes with legislative functions through inducements or coercion. Legislators, on their part, have been accused of using their oversight roles to extort ministries and agencies under the guise of budget approvals and committee investigations (Ibeanu, 2007, p. 33).

Moreover, electoral processes in Nigeria are frequently marred by power abuse. Political elites manipulate electoral institutions, deploy security forces to intimidate opponents, and engage in vote buying and ballot stuffing. These actions erode public trust and weaken the legitimacy of elected leaders. According to Ojo (2009), elections in Nigeria are often contests of coercion rather than expressions of popular will (p. 139).

Judicial independence has also been compromised in many instances. The judiciary is constitutionally expected to act as a check on executive and legislative powers, but there have been numerous reports of judicial officers being influenced through political

pressure or bribery. High-profile cases involving political figures are frequently delayed or dismissed on technical grounds, contributing to a culture of impunity (Oko, 2008). Abuse of power is also rampant at the state and local government levels. State governors often act as mini-autocrats, controlling local government appointments, finances, and administrative decisions. This has led to stunted development at the grassroots, as local councils are denied autonomy and resources. As noted by Ikelegbe (2005), the centralization of power at the state level undermines the federal character of Nigeria's constitution and promotes authoritarianism (p. 81).

The use of security forces to silence opposition or civil protests represents another layer of abuse of power. Peaceful protesters have been met with violence, as witnessed during the #EndSARS movement in 2020, where security operatives used lethal force against unarmed civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2021, p. 25; Amnesty International, 2020). This action was condemned both locally and internationally and highlighted the extent to which state power could be used repressively against its citizens.

Power and its abuse in Nigeria's political structure is a systemic problem founded in a legacy of military rule, weak institutions, and a political culture that prioritizes personal gain over public service. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening institutions, promoting transparency, and cultivating a political culture anchored on justice, equality, and the rule of law.

LOCKE'S SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

John Locke's social contract theory is a framework where the legitimacy of political authority is grounded fundamentally on the consent of the governed. This theory contends that individuals in the state of nature voluntarily enter into a contract to form a civil society governed by laws designed to protect their natural rights, including life, liberty, and property (Locke, 1689, p. 108). This voluntary consent is critical because political power does not originate from divine right or hereditary privilege but rather from the collective agreement of free individuals seeking security and order (Tuckness, 2010, p. 54). The social contract thus becomes imperative as a normative foundation for legitimate government. This principle, applied to Nigerian politics, implies that governmental authority is based on the ongoing consent and active participation of its citizens. Unfortunately, the reality in Nigeria diverges significantly from this ideal, as governmental legitimacy has been repeatedly undermined by practices that violate the conditions of the social contract, such as corruption, electoral manipulation, and abuse of power (Okafor, 2018, p. 140). These breaches contribute to widespread political disillusionment and erode the trust necessary for a stable political order (Bratton & Chang, 2006).

The fiduciary nature of government power is a central insight from Locke's theory that resonates with Nigerian political dynamics. Locke argued that political leaders act

as trustees of the people's rights and welfare; their authority is conditional on fulfilling this role faithfully (Umezurike, 2019, p. 79). When rulers prioritize personal enrichment, nepotism, or the interests of a narrow elite over the public good, they violate the trust inherent in the social contract and consequently lose their legitimate authority (Dunn, 2006, p. 119). In Nigeria, decades of entrenched patronage networks and elite self-interest have undermined governance institutions, fostering a culture where political offices are treated as opportunities for personal gain rather than public service (Okafor, 2018, p. 142). This betrayal of the social contract explains why citizens often perceive their leaders as illegitimate and motivates demands for reform and accountability. Thus, Locke's fiduciary framework provides a normative yardstick for evaluating political leadership and governance quality in Nigeria, urging a shift from self-serving practices toward a government truly accountable to the people.

In Nigeria, democratic institutions have often been weakened by electoral fraud, violence, and restrictions on political freedoms, which obstruct meaningful participation and undermine the legitimacy of elected officials (Okafor, 2018, p. 138). These systemic deficiencies not only disenfranchise citizens but also erode the social contract's foundation, making it difficult for governments to claim authentic consent. Locke's framework therefore advocates for strengthening democratic practices and institutions to ensure that citizens have real opportunities for consenting to their rulers and holding them accountable. Empowering civil society, protecting electoral integrity, and safeguarding freedoms of speech and assembly are necessary steps to rebuild trust and renew the social contract in Nigeria (Gyimah-Boadi, 2004).

Locke's social contract emphasizes the protection of minority rights and the necessity of the rule of law to prevent tyranny and safeguard justice (Tuckness, 2010, p. 71). This principle is particularly salient in Nigeria's diverse multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, where inclusive governance is essential to maintain social harmony. The neglect or marginalization of certain groups threatens the social contract's integrity by fostering grievances and undermining national unity (Okafor, 2018, p. 146). Locke's emphasis on the rule of law, where laws apply equally to all and constrain arbitrary power, is vital for Nigeria's democratic consolidation and the prevention of authoritarian tendencies. Establishing a political culture that respects diversity, protects minority rights, and enforces the rule of law is imperative to rebuild citizens' trust and uphold the social contract (Mustapha, 2009).

ADDRESSING ABUSE OF POWER IN NIGERIAN POLITICS USING LOCKE'S POLITICAL THEORY

In the face of systemic abuse of power in Nigerian politics, John Locke's political theory offers a meaningful philosophical framework for understanding and addressing these issues. Locke's focus on natural rights, the social contract, and the legitimacy of

government provides a foundation upon which Nigerian political reform can be based. Locke's view of political legitimacy is crucial in confronting power abuse in Nigeria. According to Locke, a government's legitimacy is derived from the consent of the governed, a principle that directly challenges the authoritarian tendencies that often prevail in Nigerian politics. In Locke's framework, legitimate government is established through the social contract, where rulers are entrusted with power solely to protect the natural rights of citizens (Tuckness, 2010, p. 54). When governments fail in this role, as is often the case in Nigeria where corruption and abuse of power are rampant, the social contract is violated. Locke argues that in such cases, the people have the right to withdraw their consent and resist unjust authority. This right to resistance provides a powerful moral and legal tool for citizens who are subjected to the abuses of power, giving them the right to demand accountability and change (Forster, 2005).

The right to resistance is an essential part of Locke's theory and offers a crucial countermeasure to the abuse of power. Nigerian political leaders who engage in corruption, electoral fraud, or oppression undermine the trust of their citizens, thereby breaking the social contract. Locke's theory suggests that when rulers overstep their bounds, citizens are morally justified in resisting their authority. This resistance can take various forms, from peaceful protests to legal actions, and even revolutionary movements when all other avenues have failed (Ashcraft, 1986, p. 118). For example, the protests against election rigging or police brutality in Nigeria can be seen as manifestations of Locke's justification for resistance against government oppression (Nwankwo, 2021).

Moreover, Locke's emphasis on the separation of powers provides a framework for addressing the unchecked accumulation of power in Nigeria. The centralization of authority in the hands of a few, often seen in the Nigerian executive branch, leads to political repression and the abuse of power. Locke's model of government advocates for the division of power among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches to prevent any one entity from becoming too powerful. Strengthening institutions that act as checks on government authority can help combat the overreach of power that is common in Nigeria's political landscape (Dunn, 2006, p. 64).

Accountability is another key component of Locke's theory that can help mitigate the abuse of power. According to Locke, rulers are not sovereign in an absolute sense; they are accountable to the people, and their power must be exercised within the bounds of the law. In the context of Nigerian politics, this means that public officials should be held accountable for their actions, and there should be mechanisms in place to investigate corruption, enforce laws, and punish those who violate the public trust (Yolton, 2004, p. 92). Strengthening institutions designed to hold government officials accountable, such as the Nigerian Anti-Corruption Commission, would serve to create an environment where power is less likely to be abused (Okafor, 2018).

Locke's conception of constitutionalism plays a vital role in addressing power abuses. Locke's ideal government is one that operates according to a constitution that limits the scope of government action and protects individual rights. In Nigeria, while the constitution provides a legal framework for governance, the frequent disregard for constitutional principles by those in power perpetuates corruption and abuse. Enforcing the constitution and ensuring that government actions are aligned with its principles could curtail abuses and ensure that government is exercised in the best interest of the people (Nwabueze, 1973).

Locke's political theory offers practical solutions to address the abuse of power in Nigerian politics. By emphasizing the importance of consent, accountability, resistance to tyranny, and constitutional governance, Locke provides a framework for reform that can help curb corruption and restore legitimacy to Nigeria's political system. Applying Locke's ideas to contemporary Nigerian political struggles could lead to a more just and equitable society where political power is exercised responsibly and in accordance with the principles of natural rights and the common good.

SEPARATION OF POWER IN STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE

The concept of separation of powers is one of the foundations of modern constitutional governance and democratic theory. It fundamentally refers to the institutional division of government authority into distinct branches, typically the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary, each tasked with different functions and powers to prevent the concentration and potential abuse of power (Bellamy, 2010, p. 23). This separation aims to establish a system of checks and balances, where each arm can monitor and restrain the others, thereby ensuring accountability, protecting individual liberties, and sustaining the rule of law (Elgie, 2011, p. 47).

Historically, the doctrine finds its intellectual roots in the writings of John Locke and Montesquieu, whose works underscored the perils of consolidated power. For example, Heywood (2015) notes that Locke's political theory explicitly distinguishes between legislative and executive powers, warning that their fusion leads to tyranny and arbitrary rule (p. 125). Montesquieu's seminal *The Spirit of Laws* further elaborates this principle, emphasizing that political liberty flourishes only where these powers are separate and independent, each capable of acting as a check on the others (Bobbio, 2010, p. 79). Contemporary political science recognises these insights, highlighting the separation of powers as indispensable for the functioning of democratic systems (Fukuyama, 2011, p. 157).

In the Nigerian context, the formal adoption of the separation of powers is enshrined in the 1999 Constitution, which establishes the legislature, executive, and judiciary as separate arms of government. Nonetheless, the pragmatic realization of this principle has faced significant challenges. The executive branch often dominates

Nigerian politics, exerting disproportionate influence over the legislature and judiciary, thereby undermining the balance intended by the constitutional framework (Suberu, 2011, p. 88). This imbalance gives room for the abuse of power, eroding democratic consolidation and citizen confidence in state institutions.

Studies indicate that the executive frequently interferes in judicial processes through control over judicial appointments, disciplinary actions, and budgetary allocations (Ojo, 2015, p. 143). Such interference compromises the judiciary's ability to function as an effective check on executive excesses, eroding the legitimacy of the legal system and weakening public trust (Ezeani, 2013, p. 136). Similarly, the legislature's effectiveness as a check on the executive is constrained by partisan dominance, patronage networks, and institutional weaknesses that inhibit robust oversight and legislative autonomy (Ibeanu, 2014, p. 77).

Beyond institutional design, political culture and systemic factors critically influence the functioning of separation of powers. Diamond (2010) argues that formal constitutional arrangements are insufficient without a political culture that respects institutional limits and values democratic accountability (p. 159). In Nigeria, the persistence of clientelism, elite capture, and personalization of power significantly undermine institutional checks and balances (Bratton & van de Walle, 2011, p. 202). Addressing these cultural and structural deficiencies requires not only legal reforms but also efforts to promote transparency, political education, and civic engagement (Olowu & Wunsch, 2013, p. 189).

Locke's political philosophy provides a normative foundation for these imperatives. His insistence that government power derives from the consent of the governed and must be limited by law reflects a commitment to popular sovereignty and the protection of natural rights (Tuckness, 2010, p. 43). This principle implies that the legitimacy of governance rests on effective institutional mechanisms that prevent power abuses. Consequently, civil society, an independent media, and an engaged citizenry are vital in holding government accountable and ensuring respect for separation of powers (Fombad, 2014, p. 118). Nigeria's evolving democratic space has witnessed the growing influence of these actors in demanding transparency and institutional reforms, although significant obstacles remain (LeVan, 2015).

Practical reforms aimed at strengthening the separation of powers must therefore address both institutional and cultural factors. These include securing independent funding for the judiciary and legislature, reforming judicial appointment and disciplinary processes to minimize executive influence, enhancing the capacity and autonomy of parliamentary committees, and promoting transparency in governance (Suberu, 2011, p. 94). Additionally, public education campaigns can deepen citizens' understanding of constitutional rights and institutional roles, reinforcing democratic norms and participation.

The separation of powers remains a vital safeguard against the abuse of authority and a prerequisite for accountable governance in Nigeria. Based on Locke's foundational ideas and contemporary scholarship, it is clear that effective separation of powers entails not only the formal distribution of governmental functions but also the cultivation of political culture, ethical leadership, and active citizen engagement. Only through this comprehensive approach can Nigeria realize the democratic ideals embedded in Locke's political philosophy.

CONCLUSION

Power, when divorced from principle, becomes a force of destruction rather than governance. This work has examined the persistent abuse of power in Nigerian politics using John Locke's political theory, revealing a stark contrast between the ideals of legitimate authority and the realities of political practice. Locke's vision of government as a trust, granted by the people and bound by law, is in direct opposition to the unchecked dominance and systemic corruption that plague Nigeria's politics. The betrayal of public trust, erosion of civil liberties, and manipulation of institutions reflect a deep rupture in the social contract. Yet, Locke's philosophy does not just diagnose the disease, but it prescribes a cure. It empowers citizens to reclaim their sovereignty, to demand accountability, and to resist tyranny. In invoking Locke, this discourse calls for a fundamental reawakening of political conscience. The future of Nigeria depends not on the endurance of power, but on its transformation, into a force that serves, protects, and uplifts the people.

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