THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE IN NIGERIA: THE WAY FORWARD, BEYOND RHETORIC. Presented by Prof. Yusuf Ali SAN, FCIArb, 1st Kuliya Ngari of Ilorin Emirate at the 2026 Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) Bwari Branch Law Week Programme from 24th to 28th April, 2026.

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1.0 PREAMBLE

Distinguished members of the Bar and Bench, learned silk, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, it is both an honour and a solemn responsibility to address you today and speak on a subject that lies at the heart of Nigeria's national existence

LEADERSHIP.

At this point, I think we have to look at some profound words of wisdom from some famous thinkers about the concept of leadership to open the gate for the discussion that follows:

"The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born that there is a genetic factor to leadership. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born." ***- Warren Bennis.***

"Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results, not attributes." ***- Peter Drucker.***

"The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it."-

Theodore Roosevelt.

For decades, Nigeria has been described as a country of immense potential, yet limited performance. We are richly endowed with human and natural resources, yet persistently confronted with developmental deficits. The recurring explanation often points to one fundamental issue: leadership.

However, this conversation must go beyond slogans, beyond political rhetoric, and beyond blame allocation. The legal profession, as custodians of justice and constitutional order, bears a particular obligation to interrogate the leadership question with clarity, courage, and constructive solutions.

This presentation, therefore, examines Nigeria's leadership challenge holistically and proposes a way forward grounded in institutional reform, ethical renewal, and civic responsibility.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Leadership remains one of the most extensively studied and debated concepts in political science, law, sociology, public administration, and organizational theory. Across civilizations, scholars and statesmen have sought to understand why some societies rise to stability and prosperity while others struggle despite abundant potential. At the heart of that inquiry lies the question of leadership, its quality, its character, and its institutional expression.

Yet, in Nigeria, discourse on leadership too often oscillates between emotional condemnation and partisan defence. It is discussed vigorously, but rarely interrogated systematically.

For instance, when fuel subsidy reforms are introduced, the conversation quickly descends into polarized camps, one side branding the decision as heartless and anti-people, the other defending it as economically inevitable, without sustained, non- partisan evaluation of policy design, transparency mechanisms, palliative structure, or long-term fiscal planning.

During electoral cycles, attention frequently shifts from systemic questions about internal party democracy and campaign finance transparency, to emotive arguments about individual candidates, regional sentiments, or religious affiliations. The 2023 general elections, for example, generated intense national engagement; yet beyond the immediate contestation of results, insufficient sustained dialogue followed, regarding structural reforms to strengthen INEC's technological capacity, electoral dispute resolution timelines, and political party accountability.

In the security sphere, every major incident, whether insurgent attacks in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, oil theft in the Niger Delta, or separatist agitations in the South-East, sparks

public outrage and mutual recriminations. However, deeper questions about intelligence coordination, inter-agency rivalry, funding transparency, recruitment standards, and community- based security architecture often receive limited sustained analysis.

Even within the judiciary, when high-profile corruption allegations arise or when politically sensitive judgments are delivered, public commentary tends to frame the issue in partisan lenses rather than examining systemic reforms.

Thus, leadership in Nigeria is frequently personalized rather than institutionalized. Failures are attributed to individuals and successes are celebrated as personal triumphs.

Rarely do ask: Are our systems designed to outlast personalities? Are accountability structures strong enough to restrain excesses, regardless of who occupies office? Are our institutions resilient enough to sustain national development beyond electoral cycles?

It is within this context that the leadership question must be re- examined, not as a tool for political attack or partisan validation, but as a serious national inquiry into the quality of governance, ethical foundations, and collective responsibility.

The question before us is not merely ***who leads, but how leadership is conceptualized, exercised, institutionalized, and sustained.***

Are leaders emerging through meritocratic processes patronage networks? Are institutions stronger than personalities? Are ethical standards internalized or merely proclaimed? Are citizens active participants in governance or passive observers?

This presentation argues that Nigeria's leadership crisis is rooted in a convergence of historical complexity, structural imbalances, ethical erosion, institutional fragility, and insufficient civic reorientation.

The task before Nigeria is therefore not simply political transition, but moral and institutional transformation. Leadership must evolve from a contest for power to a stewardship of purpose.

Only then can the promise of Nigeria be reconciled with its reality.

3.0 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

a. Leadership

Leadership is defined as the ability of an individual, group, or organization to influence or guide other individuals, teams, or organizations.[1]

According to **James MacGregor Burns,** an American political scientist, leadership is ***"leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations of both leaders and followers."***[2]

In governance discourse, leadership also implies stewardship, the responsible management of public trust and resources.

b. Governance

Governance refers to the processes, systems, and institutions through which authority is exercised in a state. It is the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development.

c. Nation-Building

Nation-building involves the deliberate process of constructing a shared national identity, institutional stability, and civic cohesion among diverse groups within a state. It is the process of constructing or structuring a national identity through the utilization of state power.[3]

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[1]Wikipedia, Leadership' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leadership accessed 20th February, 2026.

[2]James MoGreor Burns, The Father of Transformational Leadership' (1978) <https://quarterdeck.co.uk/articles/leadership-james-macgregor-burns> accessed 20 February, 2026.

[3]Wikipedia, Nation-building' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation-building> accessed 20th February, 2026.

d. Accountability

Accountability, in this context, refers to the obligation of leaders and public officials to explain, justify, and take responsibility for their actions and decisions.

It includes legal accountability (compliance with laws), political to accountability (answerability to citizens), and moral accountability (ethical responsibility).

In democratic systems, accountability mechanisms include elections, judicial review, legislative oversight, audits, and public scrutiny.

e. Rule of Law

The rule of law is the principle that all individuals and institutions, including government officials, are subject to and accountable under the law. [4]

It requires equality before the law, independent courts, due process, and predictable legal frameworks. The rule of law ensures that governance is conducted through established legal procedures rather than arbitrary power.

f. Institutional

Integrity Institutional integrity refers to the strength, independence, and credibility of public institutions in carrying out their mandates without undue political interference, corruption, or bias. Strong institutions operate consistently regardless of changes in leadership and are guided by established procedures rather than personal discretion.

g. Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership involves decision-making that is grounded in integrity, honesty, fairness, transparency, and a commitment to the public good.

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[4]"United Nations, What is the Rule of Law <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/what-is-the- rule-of-law/> accessed 20th February, 2026.

It requires leaders to prioritize national interest over personal gain and to model moral conduct for society.

h. Democracy

Democracy is a system of government in which power ultimately resides with the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives.[5]

It is characterized by free and fair elections, separation of powers, protection of fundamental rights, and active civic participation.

i. Enlightened Followership

Enlightened followership refers to a citizenry that is politically aware, ethically conscious, and actively engaged in holding leaders accountable. It recognizes that sustainable leadership requires responsible and informed participation by the governed.

4.0 CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership is inherently multidimensional. It is creativity in action[6]. It is neither confined to elected office holders nor exhausted by political authority. While political leadership often attracts the greatest public attention, the health and wealth of a nation depend equally on leadership across multiple sectors.

A society may elect competent political leaders, yet still struggle if judicial, economic, religious, security, or civic leadership fails. Conversely, strong institutional leadership in non-political sectors can stabilize a nation even during periods of political turbulence.

Leadership, therefore, manifests across interconnected domains:

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[5] Cambridge Dictionary, 'Democracy' <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/democracy> accessed 20th February, 2026.

[6] Fitria Nur Rahmawati, Concept of Leadership' <https://www.academia.edu/29694874/CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP> accessed 20th February, 2026.

4.1 Political Leadership - Executive and Legislative Governance

Political leadership involves policy formulation, law-making, fiscal management, and national direction. In the US, political leadership has historically shaped transformative national shifts from **Franklin D. Roosevelt'sNewDeal**reformsduringthe**GreatDepression** between **1933 and 1939,**[7] to the ***CivilRightslegislationunder*** **President Lyndon B. Johnson** in **1964,** which prohibited discrimination in public places.[8]

These were not merely administrative actions; they were instances of leadership responding structurally to national crises.

In Nigeria, political leadership has similarly shaped defining moments. The transition from military rule to civilian governance in 1999 required deliberate political leadership.

However, recurring challenges such as policy discontinuity, electoral and uneven disputes, patronage politics, implementation of reforms demonstrate the tension between vision and institutional sustainability.

Therefore, political leadership sets direction, but without strong supporting institutions, that direction may lack durability.

Chinua Achebe captures the essence of all these in his seminar work "The Trouble with Nigeria" published in 1983.

4.2 Judicial Leadership Protection of Constitution and Rule of Law

Judicial leadership is often underestimated, yet it remains foundational democratic survival. Courts interpret constitutions, protect rights, and act as a check on executive and legislative excesses.

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[7]Britannica, 'New Deal United States History (2026)
<https://www.britarmica.com/event/New-Deal> accessed 20th February, 2026.

[8]National Archives, Civil Rights Act (1964)<https://www.archives.gov/milestone- documents/civil-rights-act accessed 20th February, 2026

In Nigeria, judicial leadership has played critical roles in electoral adjudication and the interpretation of the constitution. There are several decisions of the Supreme Court on electoral processes, gubernatorial tenure disputes, and constitutional amendments that have shaped the country's political trajectory.

Cases such as **AG ONDO STATE V. AG FED &ORS, INAKOJU & ORS V. ADELEKE & ORS, PRESIDENT, F.R.N V. NATIONAL ASSEMBLY,**[11] and lastly, **OJUKWU V. MILITARY GOVERNOR OF LAGOS STATE & ORS,**[12] have significantly changed the trajectory of our jurisprudence in this country, one way or another.

However, concerns about delays, conflicting judgments, and occasional allegations of external influence reveal the ongoing need to strengthen judicial independence and leadership.

4.3 Religious Leadership - Moral and Ethical Guidance

In societies such as Nigeria, where religion commands deep loyalty, religious leadership wields enormous influence over public consciousness.

Nigeria is profoundly religious, with faith leaders shaping social attitudes and political discourse. Religious institutions often provide education, healthcare, and humanitarian support. Yet the influence of religious leadership can either unify or polarize. Where religious rhetoric reinforces national cohesion and ethical discipline, it strengthens the state. Where it amplifies division or material excess, it weakens moral foundations.

Thus, religious leadership carries both opportunity and responsibility. Unfortunately, our experience in Nigeria is that people use religions to promote divisions, separateness and myopic agenda.

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[9] (2002) LPELR-623(SC) (Pp. 59-61 paras. E)
[10] (2007) LPELR-1510(SC) (Pp. 218-221 paras. C)
[11] [2023] 3 NWLR PT. 1870 PG 1-96.
[12] (1985) LPELA-21274(CA) (Pp. 51-52 paras. F)

4.4 Military Leadership - National Security and Territorial Integrity

Military leadership ensures sovereignty and stability. For more than three decades after this great country gained independence, military leadership directly governed the state. While some regimes-initiated reforms, prolonged military intervention disrupted democratic growth.

In the present democratic era, professionalization and subordination of military authority to civilian constitutional control remain essential.

Effective military leadership today must focus on intelligence coordination, modernization, human rights compliance, and collaboration with civil institutions to ensure the safety of the Nigerian state and the citizens.

4.5 Corporate Leadership - Economic Productivity and Innovation

Economic strength depends heavily on corporate leadership. In Nigeria, private sector leadership has contributed meaningfully to banking, telecommunications, fintech, trade, etc. The growth of Nigeria's economy demonstrates how visionary corporate leadership can succeed, even amid regulatory and infrastructural challenges.

Strong ethical corporate leadership is therefore indispensable to national development.

4.6 Community and Civic Leadership Social Cohesion and Grassroots Mobilization

Leadership at the grassroots level, such as local government communities and villages, often determines social stability. Community leaders, traditional rulers, civil society actors, and youth organizers play vital roles in conflict resolution, advocacy, and social mobilization.

Traditional institutions and community leaders continue to influence local governance. Where these actors promote peace

and collaboration, they strengthen national unity. Where they reinforce division, local tensions escalate into national crises.

In essence, leadership must be understood not merely as occupancy of office, but as ethical influence exercised across institutions. A nation rises not only by the quality of its political class, but by the integrity of its judges, the professionalism of its security agencies, the vision of its corporate actors, the moral clarity of its religious leaders, and the civic consciousness of its citizens.

5.0 THE EVOLUTION OF NIGERIA: POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS Nigeria did not emerge as a nation in the organic sense of shared historical identity; rather, it was the product of gradual colonial consolidation. Its political evolution is therefore inseparable from its colonial experience, post-independence instability, military interventions, constitutional experimentation, and democratic consolidation.

5.1 Pre-Colonial Structures

Before colonial rule, the territories that now constitute Nigeria were home to sophisticated political systems. In the North, the **Sokoto Caliphate** operated a centralized Islamic administrative system. 13 In the West, the **Oyo Empire** and other Yoruba kingdoms maintained monarchical systems with checks and balances through councils such as the **Oyomesi.** In the East, governance was more decentralized, particularly among Igbo communities, wheresegmentary political arrangements prevailed. [14]

These diverse systems reflected advanced indigenous governance traditions, but they were politically independent of one another. There was no unified Nigerian state.

[13]Britannica, "History of Nigeria' <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Nigeria>
[14]Ibid. accessed 20th February, 2026.

5.2 Colonial Consolidation (1861-1914)

British involvement began with the annexation of Lagos in 1861. Gradually, through treaties, trade control, and military expeditions, Britain consolidated control over various territories:

- The Oil Rivers Protectorate (later Niger Coast Protectorate),
- The Royal Niger Company's territories,
- Northern Protectorate,
- Southern Protectorate.

In **1914, Lord Frederick Lugard** amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates for administrative and economic convenience. The amalgamation was largely fiscal and strategic; it did not integrate the diverse peoples politically, culturally, or psychologically. This structural decision laid the foundation for many of Nigeria's later governance challenges.

5.3 Constitutional Developments under Colonial Rule (1922 - 1954)

Nigeria's political development under colonial rule progressed through a series of constitutional reforms:

- **Clifford Constitution (1922):** Introduced limited elective representation in Lagos and Calabar.
- **Richards Constitution (1946):** Recognized regional divisions (North, West, East) and introduced regional councils.
- **Macpherson Constitution (1951):** Expanded regional autonomy and increased Nigerian participation in governance.
- **Lyttleton Constitution (1954):** Established a federal system, granting substantial autonomy to regions. [15]

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[15] Husman Sodiq,z Constitutional Development in Nigeria: History & Prospects' (2024) <https://www.withinnigeria.com/piece/2024/08/05/constitutional-development-in- nigeria-history-prospects/> accessed 20th February, 2026.

These constitutional experiments deepened regionalism. Political parties emerged largely along ethnic and
regional lines:

- Northern People's Congress (NPC),
- Action Group (AG),
- National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC).

While these developments advanced self-governance, they also institutionalized ethnic competition within the political structure.

5.4 Independence and the First Republic (1960-1966)

Nigeria gained independence on **1st October 1960** under a parliamentary system of government modelled after the Westminster system. **Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa** became **Prime Minister,** while **Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe** served as **Governor- General** (later President in **1963** when Nigeria became a republic). [16]

The First Republic faced significant challenges such as regional rivalry, electoral violence (notably the Western Region crisis of **1965**), census controversies, and allegations of corruption. [17]

Political instability culminated in the military coup of **15th January 1966,** led by **Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu.** Prime Minister Balewa and several regional leaders and military officers of Northern and South-Western extension were killed. This marked the end of Nigeria's First Republic.

5.5 Military Rule and Civil War (1966-1979)

Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi assumed power but was overthrown in a counter-coup in **July 1966,** [18] leading to the

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[16] Old Naija, The First Republic In Nigeria And Its Collapse (1960-1966)' (2026) <https://oldnaja.com/2019/09/15/the-first-republic-in-nigeria-and-its-collapse-1960- 1966/ accessed 20th February, 2026.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Aimilton Precious, 'Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi: The Soldier Who Inherited a Broken Nation' (2026) Historical Nigeria <https://historicainigeria.com/major-general- johnson-aguiyi-irunsi-the-soldier-who-inherited-a-broken-nation/> accessed 20 February, 2026.

emergence of **GeneralYakubu Gowon a**s Military Head of State.[19] Ethnic tensions escalated, culminating in the declaration of the **Republic of Biafra** in **1967** by **Lieutenant-Colonel Odumegwu- Ojukwu**[20] and a civil war that lasted until 1970,[21]

Post-war Nigeria pursued a policy of **"No Victor, No Vanquished [22]** and initiated reconstruction efforts. However, military governance centralized power significantly, weakening the federal balance. Subsequent military leadership includes **General Murtala Mohammed (1975-1976)[23]**and **General Olusegun Obasanjo (1976-1979),[24]** who transitioned the country back to civilian rule.

5.6 Second Republic

In **1979,** Nigeria adopted a presidential system modelled after the United States Constitution and **Shehu Shagari** became Nigeria's first elected President. [25] The intention was to reduce ethnic tensions inherent in parliamentary regional politics.

However, economic downturn, allegations of corruption, and electoral controversies led to another military coup in **December 1983,** bringing **Major General Muhammadu Buhari** to power. [26]

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[19]Britannica, Yakubu Gowon <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Yakubu-Gowan> accessed 20 February, 2026.

[20]Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, Remembering Nigeria's Biafra war that many prefer to forget' (2020) BBC News <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51094093> accessed 20th February, 2026. Ibid.

[22] Aimilton Precious, "The Doctrine of "No Victor, No Vanquished: Nigeria's Path from War to Reconciliation' (2026) Historical Nigeria <http://historicalnigeria.com/the-doctrine-of- no-victor-no-vanquished-nigerias-path-from-war-to-reconciliation/> accessed 20 February, 2026.

[23]Kayode Robert Idowu, 'Remembering Murtala Muhammed' (2026) The Nation <https://thenariononlineng.net/remembering-murtula-muhammed/> accessed 20th February, 2026.

[24]Aimilton Precious, 'Olusegun Obasanjo: The General Who Handed Over Power (2026) Historical Nigeria <https://historicalnigeria.com/olusegun-ohasanjo-the-general-who- handed-over-power/> accessed 20th February, 2026.

[25]Ayomide Akinbode, 'Remembering Shehu Shagari at 100: Nigeria's First Executive President (1979 1983) HistoryVille <https://www.thehistoryville.com/shehu-shagari- 100 accessed 20th February, 2026. Tracy Moses, 1942-2025: Buhari's Life, Journey Through Nigerian Military' (2025) Point <https://pointblanknews.com/pon/exclusjyc/1942-2025-bubaria-life-journey-Blank News through-nigerian-military/> accessed 20th February, 2026.

5.7 Prolonged Military Era (1983-1999)

The period between 1983 and 1999 was dominated by military regimes, which are as follows:

- Muhammadu Buhari (1983-1985),[27]
- Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993), [28]
- Ernest Shonekan (Interim, 1993), [29]
- Sani Abacha (1993-1998),[30]
- Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998-1999).[31]

This era sawStructural Adjustment Programs (SAP), human rights concerns, suppression of political opposition, and the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election 32 This prolonged military dominance entrenched centralized authority and weakened Nigeria's democratic culture.

5.8 Fourth Republic (1999 - Present)

In **1999,** Nigeria transitioned to democratic governance under **President Olusegun Obasanjo.** The **Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended)** established a federal presidential system with separation of powers among the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary.

Since then, Nigeria has witnessed the following successive civilian administrations:

- Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007),
- Musa Yar'Adua (2007-2010),
- Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2015),

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[27]Ibid.

[28] Britannica, Ibrahim Babangida' <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ibrahim Babangida accessed 20 February, 2026.

[29]Ayomide Akinbode, Ernest Shonekan (1936-2022): A Child of Circumstance' (2022) HistoryVille <https://www.thehistorvville.com/ernest-shonekan/ accessed 20th February, 2026.

[30]Britannica, Sani Abacha accessed 20 February, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sani-Abach>

- [31]Britannica, Abdulsalam Abubakar <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abdusalam-Abubakar accessed 20th February, 2026. Segun Adeyemi, June 12 annulment what happened? (2025) Pulse <https://www.pulse.ne/story/june-12-1993-election-annulment-202506050632505536 6> accessed 20th February, 2026.

- Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023),
- Bola Tinubu (2023-present).

Since **1999,** Nigeria has recorded notable democratic milestones, including the first peaceful transfer of power between political parties in **2015,** ongoing electoral reforms, and continuous constitutional amendment efforts aimed at strengthening governance.

However, persistent challenges such as federalism debates, resource control disputes, security crises, economic instability, electoral controversies, and broader governance deficits continue to test the resilience of the nation's democracy.

5.9 Structural Tensions and Contemporary Leadership Implications

Flowing from the above, Nigeria's political evolution reflects:

i. A colonial foundation without psychological integration;
ii. Deep ethnic and regional pluralism;
iii. Recurrent military interruption of democratic development;
iv. Centralization of power;
v. Ongoing struggles with federal balance.
vi. Corruption and abuse of power

These historical dynamics continue to shape leadership challenges. The tensions embedded in amalgamation, the fragility of national cohesion, uneven development across regions, and the personalization of power all influence contemporary governance.

Nigeria's leadership trajectory reflects both aspiration and turbulence. The political leadership can be highlighted as follows:

- Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (1960-1966) Prime Minister during the First Republic.
- MajorGeneral Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi (1966)- First military Head of State.
- General Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975) Led Nigeria during the Civil War

- General Murtala Mohammed (1975-1976)- Initiated reforms; assassinated.
- General Olusegun Obasanjo (1976-1979) Transitioned to civilian rule.
- President Shehu Shagari (1979-1983) - Second Republic.
- General Muhammadu Buhari (1983-1985)- Military regime.
- General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993).
- Chief Ernest Shonekan (1993) - Interim government.
- General Sani Abacha (1993-1998).
- General Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998-1999) Transition to democracy.
- President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007).
- President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007-2010).
- President Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2015).
- President Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023).
- President Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2023-present).

Each administration faced unique economic, political, and security challenges. However, systemic issues such as corruption, weak institutions, and governance deficits remained persistent.

Nigeria's political history is therefore not merely a timeline of regimes; it is a complex story of interrupted institutional development, contested identity formation, and continuous negotiation between unity and diversity.

6.0 THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE ACROSS SECTORS

Nigeria's leadership crisis is not confined to a single institution. It manifests across political, judicial, legislative, religious, security, economic, and administrative sectors. The leadership challenges will be explored sector by sector as follows:

6.1 Political Leadership

The challenge of securing capable leadership to drive effective governance has been a persistent issue in Nigeria, as in many

developing nations. [33] Past and present leaders have often fallen short of providing the vision, integrity, and competence needed to tackle the many social, economic, and political challenges facing the country.[34] Political leadership in Nigeria faces enduring challenges relating to electoral integrity, patronage politics, weak political parties, and corruption. The progress of any nation is closely tied to the quality of its leadership, as visionary leaders have historically driven political freedom and socio-economic growth. United Arab Emirates especially Dubai is a case in point.

In Nigeria, however, leadership has often failed to channel the country's abundant resources and human potential toward meaningful development. At the heart of the nation's challenges lies a leadership deficit. Political leadership, in particular, has struggled with direction and accountability, resulting in the diversion of state resources to serve personal interests rather than the common good. Corruption and a lack of clear vision among Nigeria's past and current leaders have consistently hindered meaningful progress toward effective governance.

As the saying goes, no nation can rise above the quality of its leaders. Nigeria urgently requires committed leaders who will act with integrity and strategically harness both human and natural resources to achieve sustainable national development.

Corruption has become a deep-seated challenge in Nigeria, undermining governance and weakening leadership. The mismanagement and diversion of public resources have consistently stalled national development. Funds meant for essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure are often siphoned off, leaving millions of Nigerians

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[33]Anekwe Rita Ifeoma, "Leadership Challenges and Nigeria Development. The Issues and Imperatives' (2020) IJAAMR <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348836792 Leadership Challenges and Niger Development The Issues and Imperatives> accessed 21 February, 2026.

[34]Ibid

with limited access to basic amenities and a diminished quality of life. [35]

In summary, Nigeria's political leadership continues to face systemic deficits in vision, integrity, and accountability, which have hindered national development and the effective delivery of public services. Addressing these challenges is critical for creating a leadership framework that truly serves the people and harnesses the country's full potential.

6.2 Judicial Leadership

The judiciary, as the third arm of government, occupies a unique and indispensable position in every democratic society. It stands as the guardian of the Constitution, the interpreter of laws, and the final arbiter of disputes. In performing this sacred mandate, it is expected to remain independent, impartial, and efficient, acting as a check on executive and legislative excesses, and as a shield for the weak, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

Nigeria's judiciary has historically played a stabilizing role, particularly in electoral dispute resolution and constitutional interpretation.

However, the judiciary has increasingly attracted attention not only for its landmark decisions, but also for troubling systemic weaknesses. Public confidence in the justice system has gradually declined as narratives of prolonged trials, questionable judgments, and procedural inefficiencies dominate public discourse. Courts that were once regarded as sanctuaries of justice are now, in the eyes of many citizens, arenas of endless adjournments, technical manoeuvring, and elite influence, [36]

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[35] Mark Uchenna Favour, 'Navigating Governance Challenges in Nigeria: Lessons, Impacts, and Paradigms' (2024) IDOSR https://kiu.ac.ug/assets/publications/1430 navigating- governance-challenges-in-nigeria-lessons-impacts-and-paradigms.pdf accessed February 21st, 2026.

[36] Bimak Associates, "Addressing Challenges in the Nigerian Judicial System: Mitigating Delays, Combating Corruption, and Closing Capacity Gaps (2025) <https://www.bimakassociates.com/nigerian-judicial-system/> accessed 21 February. 2026.

At the core of the challenge lies a combination of institutional fragility and operational inefficiency. Concerns have been raised about the transparency of judicial appointments and the criteria for elevation to higher benches. Where meritocracy is perceived to be compromised, the integrity of the institution itself is weakened. Furthermore, many courts still operate with inadequate infrastructure, limited technological integration, insufficient research facilities, and congested case dockets, all of which impede effective justice delivery.

The administration of justice is further burdened by excessive adjournments, abuse of interlocutory applications, and weak case management systems. Some cases linger in the courts for years, sometimes decades, leaving litigants financially drained and emotionally exhausted.37 For many ordinary Nigerians, accessing justice has become both expensive and painfully slow. In such circumstances, the age-old warning that ***"justice delayed is justice denied"*** becomes not merely rhetorical, but painfully real. Perhaps most damaging is the perception, and in certain documented instances, the reality of judicial compromise. Allegations of bribery, political interference, and selective application of legal principles have contributed to a growing trust deficit.

A judiciary that is perceived as vulnerable to external influence cannot effectively uphold constitutional supremacy or safeguard democratic and leadership values.

6.3 Legislative Leadership

The legislature plays a fundamental and constitutional role in oversight, appropriation, and law-making in Nigeria. However, oversight functions have at times been weakened by executive- legislative dynamics.

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[37]World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, 'Nigeria Overall Rule of Law Score Over Time, 2015-2025' <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2025/Nigeria/> accessed 21 February, 2026. 20

In a presidential system such as Nigeria's, the legislature occupies a central and strategic position in governance. While the executive initiates and implements policies, the legislature wields the power of appropriation, makes laws, and performs oversight functions over the executive arm.[38]

However, in practice, legislative leadership in Nigeria has faced persistent structural and operational challenges. Rather than functioning as a strong and independent arm of government, the legislature has often been entangled in executive-legislative conflicts, internal instability, and credibility concerns. Internal leadership struggles have also plagued thelegislature of the National ad state levels. Power tussles over principal offices, zoning controversies, and partisan divisions often distract from substantive lawmaking. Rather than prioritizing national policy debates, legislative sessions have sometimes been consumed by political manoeuvring and factional rivalry.

Corruption allegations have further damaged public perception of legislative leadership. The 2016 **"budget padding"[39]** controversy in the House of Representatives, which involved accusations of inserting unauthorized projects into the national budget, raised serious questions about transparency and accountability.

Another leadership deficit lies in weak policy coherence and limited ideological grounding of political parties. Legislators frequently defect between parties with minimal justification, suggesting that political survival and access to power often outweigh commitment to legislative principles.

This weakens institutional stability and erodes the legislature's capacity to act as a policy-driven body.

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[38] Eberechukwu E, Aisha A, Gbenga 1, Executive-Legislative Relations in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Leadership Dynamics and Institutional Conflicts During the Buhari Administration (2015-2023) (2025) IJRISS <https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/articles/executive-legislative-relations-in- nigerias-fourth-republic-leadership-dynamics-and-institutional-conflicts-during-the-buhari administration-2015-2023/> accessed 21 February, 2026.

[29] Aguguom A. Theophilus, Budget Padding: The Nigerian Perspective' (2016) JAAR <https://ijaar.org/articles/Volume2-Number12/Social-Management-Reiences/ijaur-ams v3n1-jan 17-p3.pdf> accessed 21 February, 2026.

Furthermore, legislative oversight, one of the most critical tools for ensuring executive accountability, has at times appeared inconsistent. While investigative hearings are common, enforcement of recommendations and sanctions has often been selective or ineffective. In some instances, oversight activities have been criticized as performative rather than transformative. The matter is made worse by stringent exceptions that the legislature uses the oversight function to extort money from MDAS.

The cumulative effect of these challenges is a legislature that struggles to assert full institutional independence while simultaneously grappling with internal credibility issues. When legislative leadership is weakened by factionalism, corruption allegations, or executive dominance, the entire architecture of democratic governance suffers.

6.4 Religious Leadership

Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world, and religious leaders wield enormous moral and social influence. [40] Religious institutions contribute significantly to education, healthcare, and humanitarian services.

However, religious rhetoric has sometimes intensified corruption during electoral cycles. Sectarian tensions have historically contributed to conflict in areas such as Kaduna and Plateau States. Additionally, the commercialization of religion and prosperity theology debates have raised questions about accountability and ethical leadership within religious institutions.

Religious leadership has the capacity to promote peacebuilding and national unity, yet where divisive narratives prevail, it can deepen fragmentation. Leaders in Politics of

[40] Garba Joseph, Benjamin Karbon, Rimamshon Mbaetizuak, The Impacts of Religious Nigeria Pluralistic Society (2025) IJLPHR <https://cambridgeresearchpub.com/ijlphr/article/view/688?articles BySame Author Page 14> accessed 21 February, 2026.

6.5 Security Sector Leadership

Security leadership in Nigeria presents one of the most urgent and complex dimensions of the country's broader leadership crisis. Despite significant budgetary allocations to defence and internal security over the years, insecurity persists in multiple forms such as insurgency in the North-East, banditry and mass kidnappings in the North-West, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, separatist agitations in the South-East, and oil theft and militancy in the Niger Delta. These challenges reveal not merely operational weaknesses, but deeper leadership deficiencies within the security architecture.[41]

One of the most persistent challenges is **corruption and nepotism** within security institutions. Allegations of diversion of defence funds have periodically surfaced, most notably the investigations into the alleged mismanagement of arms procurement funds during the fight against Boko Haram (popularly referred to as the **"Dasukigate"** scandal). [42] When resources earmarked for equipment, intelligence, and troop welfare are mismanaged, the morale and effectiveness of security personnel are severely compromised. Nepotistic appointments or politically motivated promotions further weaken professionalism, leadership, and institutional integrity.

Another critical challenge is **weak intelligence coordination and inter-agency rivalry.** Nigeria's security framework involves multiple agencies -the Armed Forces, the Nigeria Police Force, the Department of State Services (DSS), the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), among others. However, poor information sharing andlack of coordinated strategy have sometimes resulted in delayed or ineffective responses to security threats. Several incidents of large-scale kidnappings, including the abduction of schoolchildren in states such as Kaduna,

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[41] Omokide Sherifat Aliu, 'Leadership and National Security Challenges in Nigeria: Impacts National Development (2025) JPSLR <https://iardjournals.org/get/JPSLR/VOL.%2011%20NO.%207%202025/Leadership%20and%20National%20Security%201-15.pdf> accessed 21 February, 2026. Wikipedia, $2 billion arms deal' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/$2 billion arms deal> accessed 21 February, 2026.

Katsina, and Zamfara, exposed gaps in rapid response mechanisms and preventive intelligence gathering. Addressing Nigeria's security leadership challenges requires more than increased military expenditure. It demands governance reforms that strengthen transparency and accountability within security institutions. Most importantly, it requires leadership that understands that sustainable national security is inseparable from justice, economic inclusion, and public trust.

Across political, judicial, legislative, religious, and security sectors, Nigeria's leadership challenge is not merely one of competence but of institutional strength, ethical consistency, and systemic coordination. While reforms have been attempted, sustainable transformation requires leadership models that prioritize institutional integrity over personal advantage.

7.0 THE WAY FORWARD: BEYOND RHETORIC

Nigeria's leadership deficitcannot be resolved by speeches, slogans, or seasonal reforms. It requires both **structural transformation and moral renewal,** a deliberate re-engineering of institutions and a reawakening of national conscience. It requires the building, sustaining, and enduring national institutions.

The way forward must therefore move beyond complaint to intentional nation-building.

7.1 Conscious Grooming of Future Leaders

Leadership must not be accidental; it must be cultivated. Nations that thrive invest deliberately in leadership development from an early stage. In Nigeria, leadership preparation is often reactive, and individuals emerge into public office without structured training in governance, ethics, or public administration.

Leadership grooming should begin in:

- Primary and secondary schools through civic education,
- Universities through leadership institutes and student governance reforms,
- Professional bodies such as the NBA, NMA, NSE, ICAN, etc.,
- Political parties through ideological training and internal democracy.

Countries like Singapore and Rwanda have institutionalized leadership academies for public service. Nigeria can strengthen institutions such as the **National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS)** and similar bodies to function as genuine incubators of ethical and strategic leadership centres rather than ceremonial platforms.

Mentorship programs within political parties and public institutions should replace patronage-based succession. Leadership must be built on competence, not proximity to power.

7.2 Ethical Reorientation and Institutional Integrity

No structural reform can survive without moral foundations. Integrity, transparency, and accountability must move from being campaign promises to enforceable standards.

Ethical reorientation requires certain principles such as:

- Strengthening anti-corruption agencies (EFCC, ICPC) to operate free from political influence,
- Transparent public procurement systems,
- Strict enforcement of asset declaration laws,
- Protection for whistleblowers.

Public office must be seen as stewardship, not entitlement. Religious institutions, educational curricula, and civil society must collaborate in reinforcing ethical values. Anti-corruption campaigns should be institutional, not personality-driven.

7.3 Imbuing Patriotism Above Ethnic Loyalty

One of Nigeria's enduring challenges is the tension between national identity and ethnic allegiance. Elections, appointments, and policy debates are often filtered through tribal and regional lenses.

True patriotism requires that citizens prioritize national stability and progress over sectional interests. Civic education should emphasize shared history, constitutional values, and collective destiny. National youth programs, such as the NYSC, should be strengthened and reformed to deepen integration rather than operate as routine postings.

National unity does not demand uniformity; it demands shared commitment to a common future.

7.4 Nation-Building Over Ethnic Fragmentation

Nigeria was forged through colonial amalgamation in 1914, but nationhood requires deliberate construction. Federal character principles were introduced to promote inclusion; however, they must be balanced with meritocracy to avoid institutional mediocrity.

The ongoing debates about restructuring, fiscal federalism, and state police reflect legitimate concerns about over-centralization. A functional federation must empower sub-national governments while maintaining national cohesion.

Nation-building requires:

- Inclusive governance,
- Fair resource distribution,
- Institutional fairness,
- Equitable representation grounded in competence.

7.5 Re-evaluating the National Value System

Nigeria's value system has increasingly tilted toward materialism, conspicuous wealth, and social status measured by affluence rather than contribution. Public admiration often favors sudden wealth over sustained service.

A recalibration is necessary. Societies progress when they celebrate:

- Dignity of labour,
- Innovation,
- Ethical entrepreneurship,
- Academic excellence,
- Public service integrity.

National honours and public recognition systems should prioritize ethical contributions and measurable impact rather than political loyalty.

Cultural reform must begin within families, religious institutions, media platforms, and educational spaces.

7.6 Creating Opportunities and Restoring Hope

Insecurity and social unrest often thrive where hopelessness persists. Youth unemployment, underemployment, and limited economic mobility contribute significantly to crime, migration ("japa"), and instability.

Sustainable leadership must prioritize:

- Job creation through industrialization and technology,
- Support for small and medium enterprises,
- Skills acquisition programs,
- Investment in education and digital economy infrastructure.

The removal of fuel subsidies in 2023, though fiscally justified, illustrated how reforms must be accompanied by social safety nets to prevent economic shocks from eroding public trust. Opportunity reduces vulnerability to extremism and criminality.

7.7 Enlightened Followership

Leadership does not exist in isolation; it reflects the character of its followers. Citizens who trade votes for immediate gratification reinforce transactional politics.

Enlightened followership requires:

- Responsible voting,
- Active civic participation,
- Demand for transparency,
- Refusal to normalize corruption.

Civil society organizations, media institutions, and professional bodies must hold leaders accountable through evidence-based advocacy.

A politically literate citizenry is the strongest safeguard against tyranny and incompetence.

7.8 Cultivating a Home-Grown Democracy

Nigeria operates a presidential system modelled largely after the United States. While constitutional borrowing is common globally, democracy must be adapted to local realities. Rather than copy foreign models uncritically, Nigeria must evolve a democratic system that reflects its cultural diversity, socio- economic realities, and historical context.

Democracy is not merely about periodic elections; it is about accountable institutions, responsive governance, and participatory citizenship.

8.0 CLOSING REFLECTION

Nigeria's leadership challenges are neither accidental nor insurmountable. It is rooted in history, shaped by institutions, and sustained by values. Yet it is reformable.

The way forward requires courage not only from those who govern, but from those who are governed. Structural reform without moral reform will fail. Moral reform without institutional reform will collapse. Nigeria must pursue both simultaneously.

Beyond rhetoric lies responsibility. Beyond blame lies rebuilding. Beyond complaint lies commitment.

If Nigeria is to rise to its potential, leadership must cease to be a slogan and become a measurable, ethical, and national enterprise.

The future of Nigeria will not be determined by the abundance of its resources, but by the quality of its leadership and the vigilance of its citizens.

Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you sincerely for your patience and attentive listening. I hope that beyond the analysis and critique, each of us leaves this hall with at least one conviction, one renewed sense of responsibility, and one practical commitment to contribute to better leadership in our respective spheres.

The task of rebuilding Nigeria does not rest on a select few but on all of us.

May we rise to that responsibility. It is a task that cannot wait till tomorrow.