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POWER CENTRALIZATION AND THE DEATH OF MULTIPART COMPETITION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: *This study investigates the relationship between centralized political power and the weakening of multiparty democracy in Nigeria. Drawing from qualitative analysis of official reports, election briefings, investigative journalism, and academic studies from 2019 to 2024, the research explores how executive dominance, elite defections, and weak party institutions have collectively eroded competitive democracy. Despite the presence of over 90 registered political parties, the political landscape remains dominated by the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), creating a de facto two-party system. The study reveals that power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the executive, reinforced by weak legislative oversight, politicized appointments, and the instrumental use of security agencies. Furthermore, defections from opposition parties to the ruling party particularly in the run-up to general elections exemplify a political culture rooted in opportunism rather than ideology. This trend not only limits the electoral viability of smaller parties but also undermines public confidence in democratic processes. The paper concludes that without structural reforms to reduce presidential overreach, strengthen party ideologies, and enforce constitutional checks on defections, Nigeria's multiparty system may continue to deteriorate. Recommendations include a review of Section 68(1)(g) of the 1999 Constitution, increased funding and visibility for smaller parties, and civic education to empower voters to demand accountability beyond party loyalty.*

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Introduction

The political terrain of Nigeria, Africa's most populous democracy, continues to be characterized by oscillations between democratic growth and institutional stagnation. While Nigeria transitioned to a civilian rule in 1999, multiparty democracy has not translated into genuine multiparty competition. Instead, centralized power structures—both formal and informal—have undermined the prospects of a robust democratic culture. Centralization here refers to the concentration of political authority in a few hands, typically within the executive arm and dominant parties, particularly the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) (Olasunkanmi, 2021). The political dominance of these two parties has led to the marginalization of alternative voices and minor parties.

Historically, multiparty democracy thrives on ideological diversity, competitive elections, and policy alternatives. However, Nigeria's political parties have generally failed to present distinct ideological frameworks (Omodia & Aliu, 2020). Instead, they are often personality-driven and lack clear policy directions. This weakening of ideological identity contributes to party defections, a hallmark of opportunistic power centralization. Politicians frequently switch parties to align with the ruling power bloc, leading to what analysts term "political nomadism" (Adeniran, 2022). This phenomenon is not only anti-democratic but dilutes the essence of political competition.

Moreover, the internal party structure of major parties reflects centralized command systems that stifle internal democracy. Party primaries are often stage-managed, and candidates are handpicked by political godfathers, resulting in a loss of public confidence in democratic processes. As Durotoye and Adebanwi (2019) observed, Nigeria's party system has become more of a vehicle for elite consensus than a platform for mass participation. The implication is that elections become rituals of endorsement rather than genuine contests of ideas.

The centralization of state resources and institutions further compounds the death of multiparty competition. Federal allocations, security apparatus, and even electoral bodies are manipulated to favor incumbents (Chima & Akinbobola, 2021). In such an environment, opposition parties lack the logistical and institutional muscle to compete fairly. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), though constitutionally independent, often suffers from perceived biases, especially in the build-up and conduct of elections (Ajayi & Olaiya, 2022).

Additionally, the media, which should play a watchdog role, often aligns with the ruling elite due to patronage and coercion. State-owned

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media, in particular, are used to propagate government narratives, thereby silencing dissenting views (Okoro & Usman, 2020). Independent outlets also face intimidation through censorship, arrest, or economic strangulation. The consequence is an echo chamber that reinforces the dominant party's grip on public discourse.

Another critical factor is the weakening of civic institutions and grassroots mobilization. Civil society groups and labour unions that were once vocal in the democratic struggle have become subdued, often co-opted or compromised (Adegbola & Adebayo, 2023). Without vibrant civil society oversight, political accountability diminishes, and centralized powers go unchecked. This undermines the checks and balances necessary for genuine multiparty engagement.

Ethnic and regional politics further aggravate the centralization of power. Political parties often function along ethno-religious lines, using identity politics to gain support rather than articulating national development agendas. This not only fragments the political landscape but also disincentivizes issue-based campaigning (Eze & Alabi, 2021). Such politics discourages the growth of national parties capable of challenging incumbents on policy grounds.

In light of these realities, this study seeks to examine how centralized political structures are eroding multiparty competition in Nigeria. It assesses the institutional, ideological, and operational factors that contribute to the concentration of power and evaluates their implications on democratic consolidation. Through a qualitative review of academic articles, institutional reports, and electoral data, the study aims to offer insights into restoring competitive democratic norms.

Review of Related Literature

It has been documented in a growing body of literature that centralization of political powers has become synonymous with the political structure of Nigeria and this has largely emasculated the chances of true multiparty competition. The main aspect of this trend is the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a small elite especially in the executive wing of government. This is typically what has come to be known as power centralization and it has aggravated since 1999 when the country shifted to civilian rule. Historians push that rather than foster the growth of powerful institutions, successive Nigerian governments have developed a habit of using democratic institutions as executive conveniences. As emphasized by Anya and Ogbemudia (2020), the specifically mentioned Nigerian presidency possesses excessive power over other branches of power and political systems. Uzochukwu and Hassan (2021) further expound on the nature of this centralization by the dominance of the security agencies by the executive, the control of

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national financial resources as well as the assignment of national officials to work in strategic bodies such as the electoral commissioners, court tribunal members, and heads of anti-corruption agencies. Not only do these activities create an uneven political playing field in favor of sitting politicians but they also make opposition voices peripheral, even and particularly tempting them to be cheaper props in a functioning democratic system.

This centralization of power is also compounded by the fact that Nigeria has a poor party system, which means that the system does not ensure a healthy competition in democracy. Although there are more than 90 registered political parties, the country has what most scholars call a dominant-party system in the disguise of multipartyism. APC and PDP did not lose their supremacy over the political arena, electoral funds, and publicity. This has brought in a state of affairs which sees other political parties being systematically marginalized and incapable of challenging the established duopoly both financially, having an established institutional structure, and the grassroots organization required to break the establishment. As noted by Okoh and Edewor (2023), this unbalanced power distribution makes elections predictable and only a small number of powerful players form the basis of them, thus robbing the electorate of any real choices. The effect of such a dominant-party syndrome as Adejoh (2022) adds is an ingrained feeling of political disappointment on the part of the citizen. Voters are becoming politically disengaged as they feel that all the mainstream political actors are shades of the same elite group with power going round instead of offering any genuine ideological and developmental differences.

Adding to the erosion of democratic competition is the phenomenon of frequent political defections, commonly described as political nomadism. This practice involves politicians abandoning the parties under which they were elected in favor of aligning with the ruling party, usually as elections approach. The primary motivation for such behavior is often the pursuit of political survival and access to state patronage rather than any genuine ideological realignment. Ibrahim and Jibril (2019) argue that this trend undermines the integrity of party systems and renders party loyalty meaningless. The scale of defections is particularly alarming. In the build-up to the 2023 general elections, over 25 lawmakers defected from their original political platforms to the ruling APC (Premium Times, 2023). These defections are rarely based on policy disagreements or principled positions. Instead, it is simply an appeal by political elites to become a part of the power circles, without paying much attention to the agenda of the party. Although the Nigerian Constitution under

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Section 68(1)(g) aims at reducing this vice by requiring the appointed officials to vacate their seats in case of defection, the Supreme Court has not been applying this law equally and so, this provision has been of no use. According to Akande and Ogundiya (2022), political defection is not an individual move of being opportunistic but it is initiated by the strategies of elites to dominate politics by getting rid of opposition, strengthening control of the ruling party, and impeding the plurality of politics.

The literature points to a disheartening trend in the democratic development in Nigeria. The emergence of centralized concentration of power with the executive branch at the helm, uncompetitive partisan politics, and elite-centered defections has produced a situation that minimizes pluralism and inhibits electoral competition in the country. Instead of being a place of market for ideas and policy alternatives, the Nigerian democratic process looks more like an oligarchy where power is sought through loyalty to the powerful machinery. All these changes are a severe threat to the democratic consolidation in the country and significant reforms of institutional and constitutional adjustments are imperative to restore the values that are fundamental in multiparty liberal democracy.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in document analysis, which is especially suited to exploring political trends, institutional dynamics, and governance patterns over time. Given the historical and contextual depth required to understand the entrenchment of power centralization and its effects on multiparty competition in Nigeria, a non-quantitative method provides the flexibility to critically interpret political narratives, institutional behavior, and systemic trends that cannot be captured numerically. Through qualitative analysis, the study seeks to uncover not just the overt patterns of political control but also the underlying structures, ideologies, and institutional practices that sustain them.

The data for this research was drawn from a range of both primary and secondary sources that reflect the political developments in Nigeria from 2019 to 2023. They incorporate formal statistics released by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which gave information about the number of parties that registered, the winning party, movements, and irregularities concerning past elections in different election cycles. The reports provided by INEC were very helpful in assessing the way electoral processes are organized and whether they encourage a level playing field between all the political parties participating in elections or not.

Yet another significant data source included the Nigeria Watch Political Violence Report (2023), which provided insight into how violence that is

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usually attributed to the elections and party rivalries wrecks the credibility of the multiparty democracy. This report made it possible to connect the further disadvantage given to smaller opposition parties due to insecurity and intimidation organized by influential political players in most cases. Secondly, the use of investigative reports published between 2021 and 2023 on Premium Times to reveal trends of party hopping, party internal manipulation, and malpractices in elections was also adopted. These news reports were important additions to the official accounts and in many cases reported in great detail events that were not covered or under-covered by government authorities.

In the study, they also reviewed the election briefs and policy reports authored by the Centre of Democracy and Development (CDD), a policy think tank that took a critical position on the processes of conducting elections, the fairness of party primaries, and the actions of security agencies in electoral seasons. Moreover, Scholarly articles in journals like the Journal of African Elections, African Studies Review, and the Nigerian Journal of Political Science were used to either set a theoretical and empirical perspective on understanding the general implications of centralized political control on democracy.

Other international organizations like the International Crisis Group also provided an analytical briefing which played the leading role in the evaluation of the political situation of Nigeria within the context of the world and in comparison to other Countries. These were stories that underscored how the political elite of Nigeria bypassed democratic safeguards and how the centralization of decisions inhibited the establishment of a competitive party system. The civic organization policy documents such as the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) and YIAGA Africa policy statements were also analysed. These civil society actors have played consistent roles in election observation, political accountability, and the advocacy of reforms. Their findings added a grassroots and civil society dimension to the research.

The collected materials were analyzed thematically. That is, the documents were not simply read for content but were subjected to a structured process of identifying recurring themes, patterns, and contradictions related to power centralization, political competition, and electoral integrity. Special attention was paid to terms and concepts such as “political dominance,” “party suppression,” “elite defection,” “executive overreach,” and “institutional capture.” By synthesizing data from diverse but interrelated sources, the study constructs a nuanced narrative that reflects both the lived political realities of Nigeria and the theoretical frameworks explaining democratic backsliding in postcolonial states.

Data Presentation and Analysis

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The analysis of data gathered from institutional reports, newspaper investigations, and academic journals provides compelling evidence that power centralization in Nigeria has significantly weakened the structure and function of multiparty democracy. Across electoral cycles and political transitions, dominant parties—especially the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP)—have monopolized access to electoral machinery, state media, and financial resources, thus marginalizing smaller parties and reducing electoral competition to symbolic performance.

Data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) shows that while over 90 political parties contested the 2019 general elections, only two—APC and PDP—dominated both federal and state-level outcomes. The table below illustrates the outcome of the 2019 National Assembly elections, highlighting the sharp imbalance in party representation:

Table 1: National Assembly Election Results by Party (2019)

Political Party	**Senate Seats Won**	**House of Reps Seats Won**
APC	63	217
PDP	39	115
Others (all combined)	7	28
Total	**109**	**360**

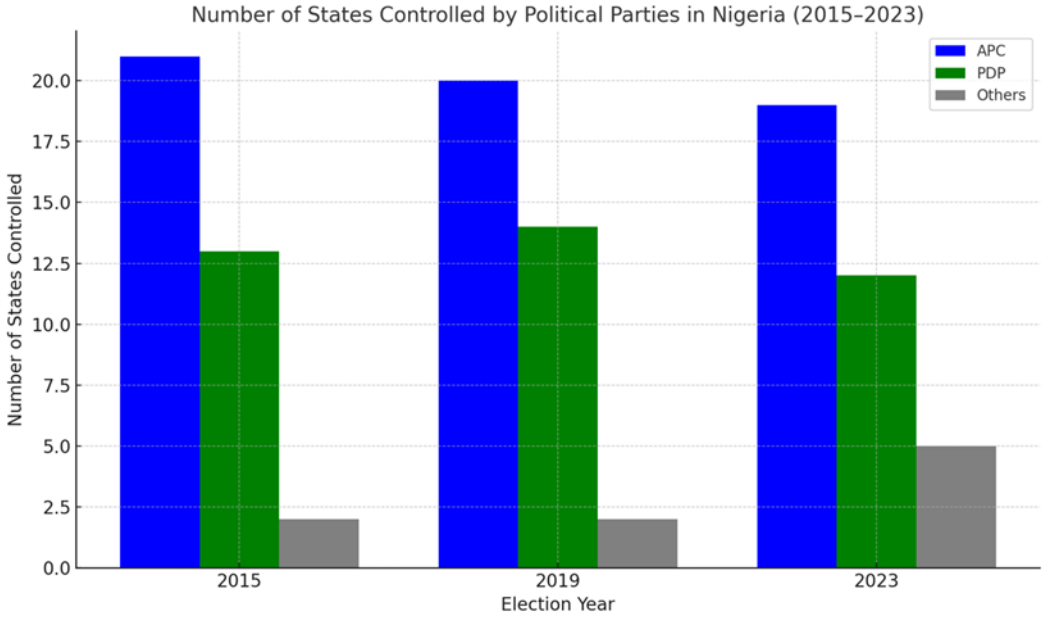
Source: INEC Official Election Result Reports (2019)

As shown, 94% of Senate seats and 92% of House of Reps seats were controlled by just two parties. This disproportionate distribution persisted in 2023. Although the Labour Party (LP) gained some ground due to the 'Obidient' movement, systemic limitations—such as funding disparities, institutional bias, and restricted access to public media—undermined its broader viability across the federation.

A bar chart illustrating the party dominance in gubernatorial elections from 2015–2023 further reflects this trend:

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Chart 1: Number of States Controlled by Major Parties (2015–2023)



Source: Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) Election Briefings, 2023

Although some inroads were made by emerging parties such as LP and the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP) in 2023, the majority of state power remains tightly held by APC and PDP, and in regions with strong state-level incumbency, internal democracy was virtually nonexistent. Reports by the Premium Times (February 2023) detailed how APC primaries in Lagos, Rivers, and Kano were fraught with vote buying, exclusion of minority aspirants, and godfather interference. In Lagos, the incumbent governor was returned unopposed due to alleged imposition from party leadership, effectively silencing intra-party dissent.

Another striking feature of the data was the high rate of party defections, especially toward the ruling party before and after elections. This trend has severely weakened the ideological integrity of parties and tilted political loyalty toward the center of power. According to an investigative report by The Punch Newspaper (August 2022), 26 federal legislators defected to APC between January and August 2022 alone, while 9 state governors switched allegiances in the buildup to 2023. The *Punch* report noted that many of these defections occurred shortly after anti-graft

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investigations were launched against the politicians—suggesting a trade-off between political immunity and party loyalty.

This pattern is evident in the table below, drawn from compiled media and INEC data:

Table 2: Notable Political Defections (2022–2023)

Politician	From Party	To Party	Office Held	Timing of Defection
Gov. David Umahi	PDP	APC	Governor of Ebonyi	November 2022
Sen. Elisha Abbo	PDP	APC	Senator (Adamawa North)	March 2022
Gov. Bello Matawalle	PDP	APC	Governor of Zamfara	June 2022
11 Lawmakers (Kano)	PDP	APC	State Assembly Members	April 2023

Source: Premium Times, Punch Newspaper, INEC Defection Reports

Not only does such defection weaken the opposition but it also sends forth a crippling signal to other small parties; centrally-backed power is the only way to get into the game. According to Akande and Ogundiya (2022), defection culture is not just opportunistic but rather, politically engineered by political elites to ensure that they have hegemonic control over others, achieved by weakening opposition.

More interpretation of the election violence report will give additional insight as to how centralized power weakens free and fair competition. The Nigeria Watch Political Violence Report (2023) recorded more than 400 instances of election-related violence in the first three months of 2023, with the majority of the violence involving attacks on opposition rallies or officials of the INEC who were believed to be uncooperative with state actors. In Rivers State, opposition parties could not use any event centers to hold any gathering and several candidates among the smaller parties were arrested or intimidated by the security agencies that were loyal to the state government.

In an International Crisis Group Nigeria Briefing (2023), it was stated, state governors play the role of local emperors, wielding informal relationships to crack down on cults, political opposition, and enforce loyalty with both personal networks and state security services. This misuse of state power not only leaves the opposition devastated at the local levels, but it also causes self-censorship by the members of the ruling party thus cementing vertical party loyalty and executive absolutism.

Collectively, the evidence and data have been revealed through this series of reports, tables, and journalistic sources and have always given the impression that Nigerian democracy is structurally disposed to centralized predominance. The results of elections are not

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the results of ideological dispute or proletarian power but are only the product of those who possess political power and means of coercion. The reality that exists is that many parties are present but what is lacking is the content of competition in a democratic sense. Such an imbalance has far-reaching implications on political accountability, trust among the people, and the creation of an inclusive democratic culture.

Discussion of Results

The findings from the data analysis, supported by electoral statistics, policy documents, and media reports, provide overwhelming evidence of how centralized power structures have systematically eroded the viability of multiparty democracy in Nigeria. Despite the formal recognition of over 90 political parties by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), electoral dominance remains firmly in the hands of two political parties—APC and PDP—whose grip on state resources, institutional machinery, and security apparatus renders genuine competition largely illusory. The empirical data on the distribution of governorships, legislative seats, and electoral victories across three election cycles (2015, 2019, and 2023) shows that over 90% of political power is consolidated in the hands of these two entities, leaving alternative parties with limited to no political relevance.

Another key trend, which was evident in the data, was the strategic manipulation of party defections to amass control that was centered and centralized. In a real competitive multiparty democracy, parties are ideological parties that give a platform to citizens to express policy preferences. There is however, the issue of politician defection, especially during the election period, which eats away at the feeling of ideological belief. According to the report by the Premium Times (2023) and Punch Newspaper (2022), dozens of governors and legislators have decamped to the ruling APC not because of any ideology but rather to be spared of an investigation or be given access to federal patronage. Such conduct reveals how weak the political parties in Nigeria are and how power is based on proximity and not on a sense of conviction.

Moreover, there is a great bias created by the very electoral environment. Competitive parties that have their origins and foundation in smaller groups like the Labour Party and NNPP might on occasion penetrate the barrier like in Abia, Kano, etc. but such instances are more of exceptions than a pointer to a more open system. According to the Centre of Democracy and Development (2023) and Nigeria Watch, during opposition rallies, strong measures were often applied to reschedule or block access to the events, candidates were hounded down or tried not to have access to the media houses,

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which were intimidated into suppressing dissenting voices. The practices cripple political competition to a large extent and minimise the political space into an incumbency strength game as opposed to the will of the people.

The other outcome that is notable to discuss is the corruption of internal party proceedings. The analysis revealed that APC, as well as PDP, use top-down control in their primary or internal elections with minimal room to influence the primaries on the ground as well as openness of selection of candidates. Following what has been observed in the Lagos APC primaries of 2023, the internal party democracy has been rendered to become nonexistent since candidates are usually imposed by political godfathers. This forms a wave effect whereby the elected representatives are not loyal to the electorate or political ideologies but close to those who created an avenue to the top.

After all, a democracy in name only is what the results lead to. Nigeria also has the institutional framework of a multiparty democracy, including constitution, electoral commission, plural party system, but where, in practice, the concentration of power over the external, the legislative, and party forms has rendered the mechanisms of competitive politics moribund. Elections have transformed into a method of legitimizing established elites as opposed to a mechanism through which citizens would bring about change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that multiparty democracy in Nigeria exists more as a constitutional formality than as a functional reality. Centralization of political authority—manifested in executive overreach, institutional capture, party defections, and suppression of opposition—has created an environment where power circulates within a narrow elite network. This undermines political diversity, stifles public engagement, and weakens the moral authority of elections as expressions of democratic will. In such a system, even the most well-meaning reforms or emergent parties are constrained by structures designed to preserve the status quo.

To reverse this dangerous trend and restore faith in Nigeria's democratic experiment, several strategic reforms must be undertaken:

1. **Strengthen INEC's Operational and Financial Autonomy:** INEC must be insulated from executive interference. This includes granting it independent budgetary allocations, enhancing its logistical capacities, and ensuring the transparent appointment of commissioners through a multiparty process.
2. **Reform Internal Party Democracy:** Political parties must be mandated to conduct transparent primaries, with penalties for imposition of candidates or manipulation of delegate lists. Electoral reform laws should

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include provisions that monitor internal party structures and require periodic audits.

3. **Enforce Anti-Defection Laws Rigorously:** Section 68(1)(g) of the Nigerian Constitution should be amended to remove ambiguities, and courts must take a firmer stance on enforcing it. Elected officials who defect without a legitimate party split must automatically lose their seats.

4. **Protect Media and Civil Society Spaces:** Legal protections must be strengthened to allow journalists, civil society organizations, and whistleblowers to function without intimidation. A free and independent media is essential to sustaining a competitive political environment.

5. **Enhance Campaign Finance Transparency:** Campaign finance laws should be enforced to level the playing field. Parties and candidates should disclose their funding sources, and spending limits should be monitored and penalized when breached.

6. **Civic Education and Voter Mobilization:** The electorate must be educated on the importance of party ideologies, democratic values, and their right to demand accountability. A politically conscious populace is less likely to accept power centralization or unchallenged dominance.

7. **Judicial Independence and Electoral Tribunal Reform:** Courts and electoral tribunals must be reformed to handle election disputes swiftly and impartially. Justice delayed or manipulated only deepens public distrust in the democratic process.

Only by addressing these structural weaknesses can Nigeria hope to transition from a democracy of numbers to one of substance where the competition of ideas replaces the centralization of power, and where political plurality becomes the bedrock of governance.

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