



## SIT-TIGHT SYNDROME AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper critically examined the phenomenon of political sit-tight syndrome and its implications for democratic governance in Nigeria. This paper underscored how the persistent tendency of political leaders to cling to power undermines democratic consolidation, weakens institutions, and erodes public trust in governance. Drawing from the institutional decay theory, the paper explored how the personalization of power, manipulation of constitutional provisions, and subversion of democratic norms have contributed to political instability and poor governance outcomes in Nigeria. This paper identified sit-tight syndrome as a major impediment to political accountability, transparency, and leadership renewal, while also proposing practical measures to address the menace. This paper concluded that genuine democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires institutional strengthening, strict adherence to constitutional term limits, active citizen engagement, and the promotion of a political culture that values leadership rotation and accountability.

**Keywords:** Sit-Tight Syndrome, Democratic Governance, Nigerian Experience.

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### INTRODUCTION

Democracy, as a system of government anchored on the rule of law, participation, accountability, and periodic leadership renewal, remains the most celebrated form of governance in the modern world (Dahl, 2020). However, in many African states, democracy has often been adulterated by the persistence of ‘sit-tight syndrome’ a phenomenon in which political leaders and elites cling to power beyond their constitutional or moral mandate. This syndrome manifests through tenure elongation, institutional manipulation, political intimidation, and electoral irregularities, all aimed at perpetuating incumbency (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013). It contradicts the fundamental

democratic principle that political authority is derived from the consent of the governed and must be periodically renewed through credible elections (Akinola, 2021).

In the Nigerian context, ‘sit-tight syndrome’ is not limited to the presidency or governorship; it also permeates local government administrations, political parties, and even university unions and traditional institutions (Ojo, 2019). The tendency to hold onto power, regardless of popular discontent, has evolved into a major obstacle to democratic consolidation. Although Nigeria transitioned from military rule to democratic governance in 1999, the quality of its democracy remains under severe strain, characterized by weak institutions, clientelism, and political intolerance (Ibeanu & Orji, 2020). Between 2015 and 2023, these tendencies became more pronounced, as political elite’s increasingly prioritized personal and party survival over national interest and democratic ethics.

The period under review spanning the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) was a defining era in Nigeria’s democratic history. The 2015 election, which brought an opposition party to power for the first time since 1999, was widely celebrated as a milestone for African democracy. Yet, subsequent developments exposed lingering threats to democratic governance, including executive dominance, institutional capture, electoral irregularities, and shrinking civic space (Omotola, 2021). Reports by the European Union Election Observation Mission (2023) and Amnesty International (2020) highlighted challenges such as flawed electoral logistics, voter suppression, and state violence during the #EndSARS protests issues that collectively undermine the credibility of Nigeria’s democratic system.

The ‘sit-tight’ tendencies during this period did not necessarily take the form of explicit constitutional amendments to extend tenure, as seen in some African states like Cameroon or Uganda. Rather, they appeared in subtler forms through control of state institutions, partisan influence on electoral management bodies, the use of security apparatus to suppress opposition, and manipulation of internal party democracy (Ezeani, 2020). These practices are symptomatic of what Diamond (2019) describes as ‘authoritarian resilience within democratic forms’, where leaders maintain the façade of democracy while hollowing out its substance.

Moreover, the Nigerian experience reflects what Okechukwu (2022) calls “democratic stagnation”, where political transitions occur, but governance outcomes and institutional accountability remain stagnant. This stagnation is sustained by elite dominance, the commercialization of politics, and the instrumental use of ethnicity and religion to maintain control. As a result, political power becomes an instrument of self-preservation rather than public service, eroding citizens’ trust in democratic institutions.

The implications of this syndrome for democratic governance are profound. It leads to weakened institutions, diminished public participation, and the erosion of accountability mechanisms (Akinola, 2021). Citizens begin to view elections as predetermined rituals rather than genuine contests, resulting in voter apathy and civic disillusionment. In the long run, sit-tight syndrome corrodes the legitimacy of the democratic state, replacing democratic norms with authoritarian habits and undermining the stability of the political system (Ibrahim, 2020).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Democracy thrives on the principles of periodic elections, respect for constitutional term limits, accountability, and the rule of law. However, in Nigeria, these principles have often been undermined by what has come to be termed the sit-tight syndrome, which is a political culture where leaders, either elected or appointed, seek to perpetuate themselves in power beyond the

legitimate duration of their tenure. This phenomenon poses a grave challenge to the consolidation of democratic governance, the deepening of political culture, and the overall stability of the Nigerian state.

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed several manifestations of sit-tight tendencies across various levels of governance. Although constitutional term limits appear to have curbed overt tenure elongation at the federal level, subtle tactics of power perpetuation persist in different forms. These include manipulation of electoral processes, suppression of opposition, use of state resources to maintain political dominance, and the imposition of loyal successors to preserve personal or party hegemony. Between 2015 and 2023, this pattern became more pronounced as political leaders sought to consolidate their influence through both legitimate and illegitimate means.

The problem is further compounded by weak democratic institutions, endemic corruption, and the absence of strong checks and balances. The judiciary, legislature, and electoral bodies have often been compromised, rendering them incapable of resisting executive overreach. Consequently, public trust in the democratic process continues to decline, as many Nigerians perceive governance as an avenue for personal enrichment rather than public service. This erosion of confidence fuels apathy, disillusionment, and a growing sense of political helplessness among citizens.

Moreover, the sit-tight syndrome undermines the essence of leadership renewal and generational change. When leaders refuse to relinquish power or manipulate the system to maintain their grip, they stifle innovation, discourage political participation, and weaken democratic accountability. The resultant effect is a stagnant political environment dominated by recycled elites and self-serving interests, which hinders socio-economic development and deepens inequality.

In the Nigerian context between 2015 and 2023, the sit-tight culture manifested not only in the form of leaders clinging to power but also through indirect perpetuation of influence where outgoing leaders attempt to control their successors or manipulate political structures to maintain relevance. This practice contradicts democratic ideals and impedes the institutionalization of governance processes. It also contributes to political crises, intra-party conflicts, electoral violence, and the erosion of democratic values. The persistence of this syndrome raises critical questions about the future of democracy in Nigeria: Why do political leaders resist transitions? What structural and institutional weaknesses enable the perpetuation of power? How has this culture affected governance outcomes and the public's faith in democracy? Addressing these questions is vital to understanding the dynamics of Nigeria's democratic experience and devising strategies for strengthening democratic resilience and leadership accountability.

## **CONCEPTUALIZATION**

### **Sit-Tight Syndrome in Nigerian Political System**

Sit-tight syndrome is the deliberate tendency of political leaders to perpetuate themselves in power beyond constitutional or democratic limits. It manifests when incumbents manipulate the political system, institutions, or electoral processes to remain influential either directly in office or indirectly through loyal successors. Oladoyin (2019) posited that sit-tight syndrome represents a deviation from democratic ideals, leading to the personalization of power and the erosion of institutional integrity. Similarly, Akinboye (2020) explained that sit-tight syndrome thrives in

political environments where state power is centralized, opposition is weak, and institutions of accountability are compromised. In Nigeria, sit-tight syndrome is not necessarily expressed through formal tenure elongation as witnessed in some African states but through indirect forms of influence such as imposition of successors, manipulation of party primaries, judicial interference, and electoral malpractices. Wyduche (2021) observed that this practice is a hallmark of African politics, reflecting an authoritarian impulse camouflaged within democratic structures.

The history of sit-tight syndrome in Nigeria is deeply rooted in its post-colonial political development. Successive military regimes entrenched a culture of centralized authority, patronage, and the personalization of state power. The transition to civilian rule in 1999 did not completely erase these tendencies, as many politicians who emerged during the Fourth Republic inherited the same authoritarian instincts (Adebayo, 2018). Between 2015 and 2023, the Nigerian democratic system experienced several manifestations of sit-tight behaviour, particularly among governors, party leaders, and national political figures. Although President Muhammadu Buhari completed two constitutional terms, the influence of incumbency and the control of party structures under his administration limited intra-party democracy and weakened the autonomy of democratic institutions (Ibrahim, 2022).

One major manifestation of sit-tight syndrome in Nigeria is the capture of state institutions to serve partisan interests. The executive arm often exerts excessive influence over the judiciary, legislature, and electoral management bodies. As noted by Ojo (2020), such institutional capture undermines checks and balances, allowing incumbents to manipulate political outcomes. During the 2019 and 2023 elections, allegations of electoral irregularities and undue influence over the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) weakened public confidence in the neutrality of electoral institutions (Okon & Adeyemi, 2023). This institutional vulnerability reinforces sit-tight behaviour, as incumbents exploit systemic weaknesses to perpetuate political dominance.

At the sub-national level, political godfathers and governors often hand-pick their successors or manipulate party primaries to ensure continuity of influence. Umeh (2021) describes this as a “proxy form” of sit-tight syndrome, where outgoing leaders retain de-facto control of state apparatus through loyal protégés. The practice erodes internal party democracy, recycles political elites, and stifles innovation in governance. For instance, several outgoing governors between 2019 and 2023 installed their allies as successors or sought senatorial seats to maintain relevance in national politics. These tactics reflect a broader desire to control state resources and maintain political hegemony beyond tenure limits (Nnadozie, 2022).

Sit-tight syndrome also manifests through the suppression of dissent and shrinking of civic space. The 2020 #EndSARS protest exemplified how state coercion was used to suppress public outcry and civic activism. Amnesty International (2021) reported widespread human rights violations during the protests, including excessive use of force by security agencies. This authoritarian tendency, though occurring within a democratic setting, signals the extent to which political elites in Nigeria weaponize state security institutions to silence opposition, protect incumbency, and deter mass mobilization (Eze, 2022).

Elections between 2015 and 2023 were characterized by logistical failures, vote buying, and questionable result collation. These electoral malpractices, as noted by Ogundiya (2020), provide incumbents the leverage to retain power or ensure continuity through chosen successors. The manipulation of the electoral process undermines citizens’ trust and diminishes the prospect of leadership renewal two essential pillars of democracy. Nigeria’s rentier state structure, driven

by oil revenue, further fuels the sit-tight syndrome. Control over political office translates directly to access to wealth, patronage, and influence. According to Ayoade (2019), the high economic stakes associated with political office make incumbents reluctant to relinquish power. Thus, the state becomes the main arena of economic accumulation, and political competition turns into a struggle for personal survival rather than national service.

Several structural and cultural factors explain the persistence of sit-tight syndrome in Nigeria's democratic system. Weak institutional frameworks, where democratic institutions such as INEC, the judiciary, and anti-corruption agencies lack the independence to check executive excesses, have made sit-tight syndrome thrive (Ibrahim, 2022). Nigeria's politics is rooted in patron-client relations, where loyalty is rewarded with material benefits, thereby promoting political entrenchment (Adebayo, 2018). Furthermore, poor political socialization has led many citizens to view politics as a means of personal enrichment rather than public service, making it easier for leaders to manipulate the masses (Eze, 2022). Persistent insecurity has justified the centralization of power in the executive, thereby weakening democratic accountability (Umeh, 2021). High poverty levels also make vote-buying and clientelism effective tools for perpetuating political control (Nnadozie, 2022).

The entrenchment of sit-tight syndrome between 2015 and 2023 has produced several damaging effects on Nigeria's democracy. When state institutions are perceived as extensions of the ruling elite, citizens lose faith in governance (Oladoyin, 2019). Leaders who manipulate systems to remain in power have little incentive to be transparent or responsive (Akinboye, 2020). Contestations over succession often lead to intra-party crises and electoral violence (Okon & Adeyemi, 2023). The sit-tight culture weakens the spirit of leadership renewal, undermines checks and balances, and endangers democratic consolidation (Wyduche, 2021).

Sit-tight syndrome remains one of the greatest threats to Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Although the period from 2015 to 2023 witnessed some democratic gains, the underlying culture of power retention, manipulation, and institutional capture continues to erode the country's democratic ethos. True democratic governance requires more than periodic elections; it demands respect for term limits, independent institutions, and a vibrant civil society capable of holding leaders accountable. To overcome the sit-tight syndrome, Nigeria must strengthen its institutions, deepen internal party democracy, promote civic education, and enforce strict adherence to constitutionalism. Without these reforms, the cycle of political entrenchment will persist, and democracy will remain a fragile experiment rather than a lived reality.

### **Political Sit-Tight Syndrome in Nigerian Politics: The Bane of Democratic Governance**

Political sit-tight syndrome in Nigerian politics constitutes a persistent and corrosive phenomenon that undermines the foundations of democratic governance. At its core, sit-tight syndrome denotes the deliberate strategies by which incumbents and political elites seek to retain power or influence beyond constitutional or normative limits. These strategies range from direct attempts at tenure extension to more subtle practices such as institutional capture, manipulation of party primaries, patronage distribution, the imposition of successors, and the selective use of state coercion to silence dissent (Oladoyin, 2019; Akinboye, 2020). In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the pattern of sit-tight behaviour is less often expressed through formal legal amendments to extend terms than through the weaponization of state institutions and political processes to ensure continuity of elite advantage. This adaptation makes sit-tight syndrome

especially dangerous: democratic forms elections, courts, legislatures remain visible while their substantive functions are hollowed out (Wyduche, 2021).

The historical origins of sit-tight syndrome in Nigeria are traceable to the legacy of military rule and a patrimonial political culture that prized centralized authority and personal loyalty over institutional autonomy. Military regimes entrenched networks of patronage and a mode of governance that valorised control, thus leaving a durable imprint on the political elite that later occupied civilian offices (Adebayo, 2018). The return to electoral rule in 1999 did not automatically reform these political habits; rather, many of the actors who emerged under civilian rule continued to reproduce patron-client relations, godfatherism, and resource-based politics. Consequently, sit-tight dynamics evolved into a sophisticated repertoire: incumbents might refrain from overt or constitutionally illegal acts yet still secure indefinite influence via proxies, manipulated party nominations, or post-tenure appointments to strategic positions (Ibrahim, 2022; Nnadozie, 2022).

Mechanisms of sit-tight syndrome in Nigeria are multi-layered and operate across national and sub-national arenas. Institutional capture is central: the executive's disproportionate influence over the judiciary, security agencies, and electoral management bodies weakens checks and balances and opens space for partisan manipulation (Ojo, 2020). Allegations of undue influence and logistical vulnerabilities in electoral administration during the 2019 and 2023 cycles illustrate how institutional weaknesses translate into perceived or real advantages for incumbents (Okon & Adeyemi, 2023; Ogundiya, 2020). At the party level, godfatherism and imposition of candidates have been routine means to entrench political networks; governors and influential patrons often determine primary outcomes and endorse "successors" who will perpetuate their interests (Umeh, 2021). Through such internal engineering, democratic choice is curtailed and political renewal stifled.

The political economy of patronage amplifies sit-tight incentives. Nigeria's rentier nature where control of oil and public revenue confers enormous distributive power creates high stakes for occupying political office. Access to state resources enables incumbents to construct and maintain clientelist networks that can be mobilized for electoral advantage and post-tenure protection (Ayoade, 2019). Where public office equals private opportunity, relinquishing power risks not only a loss of political prestige but also a loss of economic lifelines; this material calculus helps explain the tenacity of sit-tight behaviours. Relatedly, poverty and weak social safety nets make electorates vulnerable to vote-buying and transactional politics, diminishing the disciplining effect of civic accountability (Nnadozie, 2022).

The suppression of civic space and the selective application of coercive force constitute another dimension of sit-tight syndrome. The #EndSARS protest of 2020 exemplified how civic mobilization that threatens elite interests can provoke a securitized response aimed at deterrence and intimidation rather than redress (Amnesty International, 2021; Eze, 2022). When security agencies operate with impunity and without independent oversight, the resulting chilling effect on dissent weakens popular demands for accountability and reinforces elite control. This tactic also signals to would-be challengers that opposition entails personal risk, further discouraging robust political competition.

Consequences of entrenched sit-tight syndrome are both normative and material. Normatively, the principle of political rotation and the idea that office is a public trust erode as governance becomes preoccupied with self-preservation. Institutional legitimacy declines when courts, electoral bodies, and legislatures are seen as extensions of ruling interests rather than impartial arbiters; citizens' faith in democratic processes thus wanes (Oladoyin, 2019).

Materially, sit-tight syndrome distorts policy priorities: when governing elites prioritize patronage maintenance and political survival, public goods provision, long-term development planning, and transparent resource management suffer. The recycling of elites and the marginalization of new entrants stifle innovation and responsiveness in governance, entrenching underdevelopment and inequality (Akinboye, 2020; Wyduche, 2021).

Politically, sit-tight syndrome fuels instability. Manipulated succession processes and contested elections breed intra-party conflicts, litigation, and episodes of violence that divert attention and resources away from governance. The entrenchment of elite networks makes compromise more fraught and reduces the incentives for consensus-building, escalating polarization (Okon & Adeyemi, 2023). Over time, the cumulative impact can produce democratic stagnation or regression where elections continue in form but substantive democratic attributes such as accountability, transparency, and civic freedom are hollowed out (Ibrahim, 2022).

Addressing sit-tight syndrome requires a comprehensive strategy that blends institutional reform, political finance transparency, internal party democratization, civic empowerment, and rules-based security sector oversight. Strengthening the independence and capacity of electoral management bodies and judiciaries is essential to ensure they can resist partisan encroachment. Internal party reforms that mandate transparent primaries and curtail godfather influence will widen genuine competition and reduce elite gatekeeping (Umeh, 2021). Fiscal and administrative decentralization can reduce winner-takes-all stakes in national office, while improved transparency in public revenue management will limit the patronage fuel that sustains clientelist networks (Ayoade, 2019). Crucially, sustained civic education and protection of civic space empower citizens to demand accountability and reduce the transactional vulnerabilities that make vote-buying effective (Eze, 2022; Nnadozie, 2022).

### **The Manifestations of Political Sit-Tight Syndrome in Nigeria**

Political sit-tight syndrome in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023 manifested most visibly through the politicization and capture of nominally independent state institutions. The executive branch repeatedly exercised outsized influence over agencies that should have provided checks and balances, notably sections of the security apparatus, elements of the judiciary, and, at times, electoral management structures. Scholars have noted that when institutions are co-opted to serve partisan aims, the formal trappings of democracy remain while substantive accountability withers (Ojo, 2020; Ibrahim, 2022). This institutional capture reduced the capacity of accountability mechanisms to check executive excess, and thereby enabled incumbent actors to shape outcomes from prosecution decisions to administrative rulings in ways that protected entrenched interests.

Closely related was the undermining of electoral integrity through a mixture of logistical failure, procedural manipulation, and illicit inducements. Observers and analysts documented recurrent problems in the conduct of elections that fed perceptions of manipulated or managed outcomes, including irregular collation practices, late or opaque results transmission, and pervasive vote-buying. Such weaknesses provided practical pathways for incumbency advantages to translate into sustained influence; in short, flawed electoral administration became an enabler of sit-tight syndrome rather than a neutral arena for leadership renewal (Ogundiya, 2020; Okon & Adeyemi, 2023). The cumulative effect of repeated electoral controversies between 2015 and 2023 was to diminish public confidence in elections as a mechanism for genuine rotation of power.

A distinct manifestation of sit-tight syndrome was the instrumentalization of party structures and the prevalence of godfatherism, whereby powerful officeholders effectively hand-picked successors or controlled primary processes to secure ongoing influence. Political patrons at state and local levels engineered candidate selection and manipulated internal party procedures so that formal succession masked de facto continuity of the same networks. Analysts argue that this internal engineering constrains internal party democracy and produces recycled elites rather than genuine contestation, thereby institutionalizing elite continuity across electoral cycles (Umeh, 2021; Nnadozie, 2022). The practice of incumbent governors and godfathers deploying state machinery or party leverage to anoint successors was a recurrent feature in several states during the period under review.

Another profound manifestation was the shrinking of civic space through selective coercion and the securitization of dissent. The nationwide #EndSARS protests of 2020 highlighted how mass mobilization against abusive practices could be met with force and regulatory reprisals rather than responsive reform. Documented episodes of excessive force and the subsequent intimidation of protest leaders created a chilling effect that discouraged future mass civic action and reduced the costs of political entrenchment (Amnesty International, 2021; Eze, 2022). When the instruments of coercion operate without transparent oversight or timely accountability, they directly erode the capacity of citizens to hold leaders to account and indirectly sustain sit-tight behaviours.

The manipulation of legal processes and selective application of the law also featured prominently as a mechanism of entrenchment. Political actors used litigation, injunctions, and criminal charges either to harass opponents or to delay unfavorable rulings, while in other cases judicial appointments and promotions were seen as avenues for rewarding loyalists and ensuring sympathetic rulings. Scholars have highlighted that the politicization of the judiciary undermines its credibility and converts legal institutions into tools for resolving political conflicts in favor of incumbents (Ojo, 2020; Ibrahim, 2022). The uneven deployment of legal sanctions thereby became both a defensive strategy for incumbents and an offensive instrument to weaken rivals.

Post-tenure influence and the recycling of political actors into other strategic positions constituted a subtler but important manifestation. Outgoing governors and other powerful actors often sought senatorial seats, federal appointments, or leadership roles within parties as means to retain influence and protect patronage networks after formally leaving executive office. This pattern of re-entrenchment blurred the formal line between leaving office and retaining power, effectively extending the political lifespan of elite actors beyond constitutional term limits (Nnadozie, 2022; Wyduche, 2021). Such practices ensured that political cliques could continue to wield leverage over resources and appointments even when no longer occupying the original office.

Control over public resources and patronage distribution underpinned many of the sit-tight strategies. Nigeria's rentier political economy, in which access to oil and fiscal flows confers enormous distributive power, made political office a primary route to economic accumulation and clientelist exchange. The link between office and material benefit created a powerful incentive for incumbents to maintain influence by any available means, including fostering loyal networks and deploying state resources during election cycles (Ayoade, 2019). This politicized distribution of resources entrenched clientelistic relations and reinforced the material foundations of sit-tight syndrome.

Media restrictions and information control emerged as additional manifestations. While formal censorship was less systematic than in closed authoritarian regimes, pressures on critical

journalists, regulatory threats to independent broadcasters, and subtle economic squeezes on media outlets constrained investigative reporting and public scrutiny. When the media environment becomes constrained through direct intimidation or economic leverage it weakens a key watchdog function of democracy and allows sit-tight practices to proceed with reduced exposure (Ogundiya, 2020; Oladoyin, 2019).

Political violence, electoral intimidation, and intra-party conflicts were frequent symptomatic outcomes of the sit-tight dynamic. Competition over candidate slots, patronage networks, and control of state resources often produced violent flare-ups and pre- or post-electoral clashes that further degraded the political environment. Analysts link these patterns to the zero-sum stakes generated by winner-takes-all politics, where the cost of losing office is so high that actors resort to coercion or manipulation to avoid displacement (Okon & Adeyemi, 2023; Akinboye, 2020). Such instability both results from and reinforces sit-tight tendencies.

Finally, the rhetoric of security and emergency governance was often employed to justify concentrations of power. Chronic insecurity ranging from insurgency to banditry was invoked to centralize decision-making and grant extraordinary powers to executives. While security concerns were real, the invocation of exceptional measures without corresponding accountability mechanisms opened space for the entrenchment of authority and the sidelining of democratic oversight (Ibrahim, 2022; Schedler, 2015). Over time, this normalization of exceptionalism risked converting temporary security responses into durable mechanisms that curtailed political competition.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Institutional Decay Theory (Samuel P. Huntington 1968)**

Institutional Decay Theory was propounded by Samuel P. Huntington in 1968. The theory extrapolates the gradual decline in the effectiveness, legitimacy, and functionality of political and administrative institutions over time. In the context of Nigeria's democratic experience between 2015 and 2023, this theory provides a useful lens for understanding the persistence of the sit-tight syndrome and its corrosive impact on governance. The theory posits that when institutions such as the judiciary, legislature, and electoral bodies lose their strength and autonomy, they become tools in the hands of political elites, thereby undermining democratic norms and enabling authoritarian tendencies (Huntington, 1968; Diamond, 1999).

In Nigeria, institutional decay has manifested in the erosion of checks and balances, the politicization of public institutions, and the weakening of accountability mechanisms. During the 2015-2023 periods, power holders often manipulated institutions to consolidate their dominance and suppress opposition. For example, the frequent defiance of court orders, the intimidation of the legislature, and the use of security agencies for political ends reflect a systematic weakening of institutional independence. As North (1990) argued, the stability of democracy relies on strong institutions that constrain the arbitrary exercise of power; when these institutions decay, personal rule and elite capture prevail.

Furthermore, electoral institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have faced credibility crises due to alleged manipulation, delayed reforms, and inconsistent enforcement of electoral laws. These weaknesses have allowed incumbents and dominant political actors to entrench themselves, perpetuating the sit-tight culture under the guise of legality. The decay of institutions not only facilitates political sit-tight syndrome but

also diminishes citizens' confidence in democracy, creating fertile ground for apathy, disillusionment, and political instability (Omodia, 2012; Omilusi, 2018).

Thus, Institutional Decay Theory helps to explain how Nigeria's democratic framework though outwardly intact has been internally corroded by weakened institutions unable to uphold accountability or ensure genuine leadership transitions. The failure to reform and strengthen these institutions sustains a vicious cycle of elite domination, where leaders exploit institutional fragility to perpetuate their hold on power, undermining the essence of democratic governance.

### **The Cure of Sit-tight Syndrome in Nigeria: A Catalyst for Democratic Consolidation**

Ending political sit-tight syndrome in Nigeria requires a comprehensive, politically realistic and technically sound strategy that tackles both the incentives for elite entrenchment and the institutional vulnerabilities that make entrenchment possible. At the most fundamental level, the cure must be premised on the restoration and strengthening of institutional autonomy so that the judiciary, electoral management bodies, anti-corruption agencies and legislatures can act as genuine constraints on executive and dominant-party overreach. Without durable safeguards for tenure security, merit-based appointment and protected budgets, reforms will be fragile: captured institutions will be co-opted again and again to serve short-term elite interests (Huntington, 1968; Diamond, 1999). Practical steps include legal guarantees for the independence of key offices, transparent and depoliticized appointment processes, and multi-year budgetary allocations that reduce discretionary executive control over institutional resources (Ibrahim, 2022; Ojo, 2020).

Electoral reform is a second pillar of the cure. Improving logistics, securing transparent result-transmission systems, strengthening voter-registration integrity, and criminalizing and prosecuting vote-buying and other forms of electoral corruption will reduce the practical advantage incumbents derive from exploiting administrative weaknesses (Ogundiya, 2020; Okon & Adeyemi, 2023). Reforms should combine technical upgrades for example secure electronic collation with independent audits with procedural safeguards such as open, observed primaries, mandatory publication of detailed polling-unit results, and fast-track tribunals for electoral disputes to prevent protracted litigation that undermines electoral legitimacy. Equally important is empowering genuinely independent domestic observation and oversight by civic groups, which increases transparency and raises the reputational costs of manipulation (Wyduche, 2021).

Internal party democracy must be revitalized to break the hold of godfathers and gatekeepers whose power enables sit-tight continuities. Parties should be required by law to adopt clear, enforceable rules on primaries, candidate vetting and dispute resolution; party financing should be transparent and publicly disclosed, and sanctions must apply to parties that flout internal-democracy norms (Umeh, 2021; Oladoyin, 2019). Incentivizing youth and women's participation through quotas, training, and dedicated funding will reduce the recycling of elites and widen the pool of credible candidates. Strengthening civil society oversight of party processes and enabling legal avenues for aggrieved aspirants to seek remedies will also reduce the impunity of political patrons (Nnadozie, 2022).

Security-sector reform and the re-establishment of civilian control that is accountable and rights-respecting are essential to prevent the use of coercion as a tool of entrenchment. This entails professionalizing policing, creating robust internal oversight mechanisms, strengthening independent complaint and prosecution pathways for security abuses, and insulating the security budget and appointments from partisan manipulation (Amnesty International, 2021; Eze, 2022). Where protests and civic activism have been met with impunity, credible transitional justice or

accountability mechanisms including timely investigations and prosecutions for documented abuses will restore trust and make the use of force a political liability rather than an asset for incumbents.

De-linking access to economic rents from political office is a long-term but indispensable anti-sit-tight measure. Fiscal decentralization that grants states and local governments more predictable revenue streams and administrative autonomy reduces the winner-takes-all stakes at the national level and the incentives to cling to central power for resource control (Ayoade, 2019). Complementary reforms include transparent public procurement, open budgets, asset declaration with independent verification, and a strengthened anti-corruption architecture that can investigate and prosecute high-level theft without partisan interference (Ibrahim, 2022).

Political finance reform is often neglected but crucial. Strict limits on campaign spending, public disclosure of donations, state subsidies tied to internal-democratic practices, and severe penalties for illicit funding will shrink the capacity of wealthy patrons to buy political outcomes and entrench their clients. Independent auditing and civil-society access to party finance data are central to making these rules meaningful (Ogundiya, 2020; Akinboye, 2020). Where necessary, targeted sanctions on individuals who use state resources for electoral advantage applied carefully and transparently can change the cost-benefit calculation of would-be entrenchers.

Media freedom and information integrity are core democratic defenses against sit-tight syndrome. Protecting journalists from harassment, abolishing punitive regulatory threats, and ensuring economic diversity in media ownership will preserve a critical public watchdog role. Support for investigative journalism, freedom of access to information laws, and protections for whistleblowers reduce the opacity that allows elite perpetuation (Oladoyin, 2019). At the same time, combating disinformation through transparent, rights-respecting means helps maintain an informed electorate able to hold leaders to account.

Civic education and sustained engagement of youth and marginalized groups create the social demand for accountability that ultimately undercuts sit-tight incentives. Long-term curricula, community-based programmes and civic-technology platforms that explain rights, electoral procedures and mechanisms for complaint empower citizens to resist transactional politics and to mobilize around institutional reform (Wyduche, 2021; Nnadozie, 2022). Activating civil society not only pressures elites to reform but also builds resilience against authoritarian backsliding by expanding civic monitoring capacity.

Judicial strengthening and access to justice are indispensable to the rule-of-law solution. Practical measures include reforms to ensure judicial tenure security, meritocratic appointment and promotion, court budget autonomy, and institutional safeguards against executive interference. Expanding legal aid and fast-track mechanisms for politically salient cases helps ensure the judiciary can impartially adjudicate electoral and human-rights disputes without being co-opted by the political class (Ojo, 2020; Ibrahim, 2022). Policy design must also include credible transitional accountability for documented episodes that symbolized sit-tight tendencies, such as the #EndSARS abuses. Meaningful implementation of investigations' recommendations, transparent prosecutions where warranted, reparations for victims and institutional reforms in policing demonstrate that abuse carries consequences and not benefits for incumbents. This approach both addresses past grievances and creates a deterrent for future repression (Amnesty International, 2021; Eze, 2022).

International partners can play a supportive role without dictating internal politics by offering technical assistance, supporting civic monitoring, and conditioning certain forms of cooperation on governance benchmarks. However, external pressure must be calibrated to avoid

nationalist backlashes; the most sustainable changes are domestically driven, with international actors facilitating capacity-building rather than imposing solutions (Schedler, 2015; Levitsky & Way, 2010). Implementation requires sequencing and political realism. Immediate, high-impact measures include clear electoral improvements and accountability for gross abuses, while medium-term reforms should focus on party finance, institutional independence and security-sector accountability. Long-term institutionalization of transparency, decentralization and civic education will consolidate gains. Crucially, reform coalitions must be broad-based: alliance-building among reform-minded politicians, civil society, the private sector and international actors increase the political costs of reversing reforms (Akinboye, 2020; Wyduche, 2021).

Ultimately, the cure for political sit-tight syndrome is both technical and normative. Technical reforms to institutions, finance, security and electoral management create the structures that constrain elite entrenchment; normative change anchored in civic values, political culture and leadership ethics makes relinquishing power a political virtue rather than a liability. If Nigeria can mobilize the political will to implement these interlocking measures, it will transform sit-tight syndrome from an intractable bane into a political problem with a demonstrably solvable trajectory, opening space for genuine democratic consolidation and accountable governance (Diamond, 1999; Huntington, 1968).

## **CONCLUSION**

The persistence of political sit-tight syndrome in Nigeria remains a significant impediment to democratic consolidation, institutional development, and leadership renewal. Between 2015 and 2023, it became increasingly clear that weak institutions, compromised electoral systems, and elite manipulation have sustained the culture of political perpetuation. The antidote lies not only in enacting legal reforms but in transforming the political culture through civic reorientation, institutional strengthening, and leadership accountability. A functional democracy requires leaders who respect constitutionalism, a populace that demands transparency, and institutions resilient enough to resist elite capture. Ultimately, eradicating sit-tight syndrome is not merely a political necessity but a moral imperative for the sustainability of Nigeria's democratic experiment.

## **Recommendations**

- Nigeria should fortify the autonomy of democratic institutions such as INEC, the judiciary, and the legislature to function without executive interference, ensuring effective checks and balances.
- Electoral processes should be made more transparent through the adoption of electronic voting, strict enforcement of campaign finance laws, and timely prosecution of electoral offenders.
- Political parties must democratize their internal structures to reduce godfatherism and allow free, fair, and competitive candidate selection processes.
- Continuous civic education programs should be introduced to sensitize citizens on democratic values, leadership accountability, and the dangers of political apathy.
- The security agencies must be depoliticized and reformed to operate under the rule of law, protecting citizens' rights during elections and ensuring a level political playing field.

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