Juridical Sovereignty Versus Substantive Autonomy: Rethinking African Statehood in Contemporary International Relations

Ngofa Oji Nyimenuate[1], K.K. Aaron Kialee Nyiayaana[2]

Department of Political and Administrative Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, School of Graduate Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

This study examined the divergence between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy in contemporary African statehood. Although African states possessed durable legal recognition, territorial integrity, and formal equality within international society, their capacity for independent economic, strategic, and institutional agency remained uneven. Drawing on dependency theory, the study analyzed how structural incorporation into the global political economy conditioned the exercise of sovereignty beyond its juridical form. A qualitative comparative case study design was employed, focusing on Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia. Data were drawn from scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional reports and were analyzed through a structured thematic framework centered on economic structure, institutional capacity, security dynamics, and sovereign identity. The findings revealed that juridical sovereignty across the cases remained stable and internationally protected, yet substantive autonomy was mediated by commodity dependence, fiscal vulnerability, security interdependence, and internal identity fragmentation. Economic structures limited policy flexibility, security partnerships reflected relational rather than absolute autonomy, and fragmented domestic cohesion weakened institutional consolidation. While states engaged in strategic diplomatic repositioning and regional initiatives to expand bargaining space, these efforts operated within enduring structural constraints. The study concluded that African sovereignty functioned as a layered construct rather than a binary condition. Legal recognition persisted, but material autonomy required alignment across economic resilience, institutional strength, and cohesive sovereign identity. By refining dependency theory to incorporate security and digital interdependence, the study contributed to international relations scholarship through a multidimensional reconceptualization of sovereignty within global hierarchies.

Keywords: Juridical sovereignty; Substantive autonomy; Dependency theory; African statehood; Global political economy

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international system rests normatively upon the principle of sovereign equality. Since decolonization, African states have occupied juridically recognized positions within this order, endowed with territorial integrity, non-intervention rights, and formal equality under international law (Gross, 1948; Hinsley, 1986; Krasner, 1999; Morgenthau, 1985; Philpott, 2001). Yet, more than six decades after the wave of African independence, a persistent paradox remains. Juridical sovereignty has not consistently translated into substantive autonomy. While African states enjoy international recognition and membership in global institutions, their capacity to exercise independent economic, political, and strategic agency remains uneven and often constrained (Clapham, 1996; Englebert, 2009; Herbst, 2000; Jackson, 1990; Jackson & Rosberg, 1982). This contradiction forms the analytical foundation of this study.

The distinction between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy is central to understanding African statehood. Juridical sovereignty refers to the legal status of a state within international society, including recognition, territorial integrity, and non-interference (Fowler & Bunck, 1996; Krasner, 1999). Substantive autonomy refers to empirical state capacity, namely the ability to formulate and implement policy independently, regulate territory, mobilize resources, and negotiate global relations without structural coercion (Acharya & Lee,

2018; Ayoob, 2002; Jackson, 1990). Although African states achieved juridical sovereignty through decolonization, the consolidation of substantive autonomy has remained elusive (Ake, 1996; Mamdani, 1996; Zeleza, 2022).

This tension is deeply rooted in Africa's colonial inheritance. The postcolonial African state emerged within externally imposed territorial boundaries, administrative systems, and economic structures designed primarily for extraction rather than autonomous development (Ake, 1996; Herbst, 2000; Mamdani, 1996; Rodney, 1972). Colonial political economies integrated African territories into global capitalist hierarchies as exporters of raw materials and importers of manufactured goods, a pattern that persisted well beyond independence (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Frank, 1966; Mkandawire, 2015; Wallerstein, 1974). Consequently, sovereignty was inherited rather than organically consolidated. Jackson and Rosberg (1982) observed that many African states became juridical entities without equivalent empirical capacity, producing what Jackson (1990) later described as quasistates.

The imposition of structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s further constrained policy autonomy. Conditional lending and externally designed macroeconomic reforms limited fiscal sovereignty and reshaped development priorities (Harrison, 2001; Mkandawire, 2015; Stiglitz, 2002). Scholars have demonstrated how such reforms deepened external dependency and weakened domestic institutional capacity (Alden & Large, 2018; Brown & Harman, 2013). In the security domain, peacekeeping mandates, counterterrorism partnerships, and foreign military arrangements complicated classical principles of territorial control and non-intervention (Eze, 2021; Murithi, 2013; Williams, 2011). Sovereignty thus appears simultaneously affirmed in law yet constrained in practice.

The paradox has intensified within shifting global power dynamics. The post–Cold War reordering of international politics and the rise of China, renewed Russian engagement in Africa, and the growing assertiveness of emerging powers have reshaped geopolitical alignments (Abrahamsen, 2023; Acharya, 2014). Chinese infrastructure financing, digital technology transfers, and Russian security partnerships offer alternatives to traditional Western engagement but also risk reproducing asymmetric dependency (Alden & Large, 2018; Corkin, 2013; Tordoff & Apenteng, 2021). While some scholars argue that multipolarity expands African bargaining space (Abrahamsen, 2023; Amo-Agyemang, 2021), others caution that structural hierarchies remain intact (IISD, 2024; Zeleza, 2022). Debt distress, security outsourcing, and technological reliance illustrate that substantive autonomy remains structurally mediated.

At the same time, African states have pursued strategies aimed at reconstituting sovereignty. Regional initiatives such as the African Union, Agenda 2063, and the African Continental Free Trade Area represent attempts to pool economic and political authority (African Union, 2020; UNECA, 2023). Murithi (2013) and Adar (2023) argued that the African Union's normative shift from strict non-intervention to non-indifference reflected an evolving understanding of sovereignty grounded in governance and accountability. AfCFTA sought to enhance continental bargaining power through economic integration (UNECA, 2023). Yet implementation challenges, infrastructural limitations, and domestic fragmentation constrained transformative impact (Brown & Harman, 2013; Zondi, 2018). Regionalism may amplify voice, but without institutional depth and economic diversification, pooled sovereignty risks remaining symbolic.

Sovereignty in Africa is also intertwined with identity and legitimacy. Colonial boundary formation and bifurcated citizenship structures fragmented national cohesion (Ekeh, 1975; Mamdani, 1996; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Where identity is contested, state authority becomes performative rather than consensual (Mbembe, 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Empirical studies demonstrate persistent tensions between ethnic and national identification across African societies (Posner, 2004; Robinson, 2014). Weak legitimacy undermines institutional consolidation and complicates the exercise of substantive autonomy (Adebayo, 2020; Englebert, 1997). Sovereignty therefore extends beyond external recognition to include internal cohesion and political legitimacy.

Contemporary developments further complicate the sovereignty discourse. Digital governance, biometric identification systems, and cross-border data flows have introduced new debates about digital sovereignty and data colonialism (Ayoade, 2020; IISD, 2024; Turianskyi & Feldman, 2022). Youth-led digital activism has challenged state narratives and reshaped political legitimacy (Atabong, 2021; Bhabha & Nyamnjoh, 2020).

These transformations suggest that sovereignty in the twenty-first century extends beyond territorial control to encompass cyberspace, technological infrastructure, and epistemic authority (Keet, 2020; Nabudere, 2017). Without control over knowledge production and digital systems, juridical sovereignty may be eroded in emerging domains of power.

Despite extensive scholarship, a conceptual gap persists. The literature has frequently oscillated between portraying African sovereignty as hollow or quasi juridical (Clapham, 1996; Jackson, 1990) and emphasizing emergent African agency within shifting global power structures (Abrahamsen, 2023; Acharya, 2014), without systematically interrogating the divergence between legal recognition and substantive autonomy. This study addressed that gap by explicitly distinguishing juridical sovereignty from substantive autonomy and examining how their divergence shaped African statehood in contemporary international relations. Drawing from the broader thesis on African sovereign identity (Ibeabuchi, 2025), the study refined the conceptual architecture of sovereignty to illuminate the layered relationship between formal recognition and material agency within global hierarchies.

The study contended that African states possessed juridical sovereignty but experienced uneven substantive autonomy due to structural dependency, institutional fragility, and fragmented sovereign identity. However, sovereignty was not entirely hollow. Rather, it was layered and contested, with emerging domains such as regional integration, digital governance, and normative continental transformation offering partial pathways toward autonomy.

To advance this argument, the study adopted Dependency Theory as its primary analytical framework. Dependency theory emphasized structural hierarchies between core and peripheral economies and the persistence of unequal exchange (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Frank, 1966; Wallerstein, 1974). Applied to Africa, it illuminated how colonial legacies and global capitalist integration constrained policy autonomy (Ake, 1996; Rodney, 1972; Zeleza, 2022). Yet the study also extended dependency analysis to incorporate digital dependency, security outsourcing, and financialization in contemporary global politics (Alden & Large, 2018; Brown & Harman, 2013). In doing so, sovereignty was situated within both historical and emerging structures of global power.

Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative comparative case design focusing on Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia. Nigeria illustrated regional influence constrained by oil dependency and internal insecurity (Obi, 2022; Omeje, 2018). Burkina Faso reflected oscillations between radical assertions of sovereignty and strategic geopolitical realignments (M'Baye, 2019; Zondi, 2021). Ethiopia demonstrated symbolic sovereignty while grappling with internal fragmentation and conflict (Aalen, 2011; Inyang & Hamilton, 2025). Through structured comparison, the study identified patterns in how juridical recognition interacted with institutional capacity and external dependency to shape substantive autonomy.

The central research questions guiding this study are as follows. How does structural dependency shape substantive autonomy despite juridical sovereignty. What explains variation in autonomy across African states. To what extent can regional integration and digital transformation alter the balance between legal recognition and material agency. These questions carry theoretical and empirical significance because they invite a reconceptualization of sovereignty as multi layered, encompassing legal status, institutional strength, economic independence, identity cohesion, and technological control.

The argument proceeded in four stages. The study first clarified the conceptual distinction between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy within international relations theory (Acharya, 2014; Krasner, 1999). It then elaborated Dependency Theory and adapted it to contemporary African political economy (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Frank, 1966). The third stage presented comparative empirical analysis from the selected cases. Finally, the study advanced a model of layered sovereignty, arguing that substantive autonomy emerged not from recognition alone but from alignment across institutional, economic, identity, and technological dimensions.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Sovereignty in International Relations

Sovereignty remains one of the foundational organizing principles of international relations. Conventionally traced to the Peace of Westphalia, sovereignty denotes supreme authority within a defined territory and independence from external interference (Gross, 1948; Hinsley, 1986; Philpott, 2001). Classical realist thought conceptualized sovereignty as inseparable from state power, territorial control, and the capacity to pursue national interest within an anarchic system (Morgenthau, 1985). Within this tradition, sovereignty functioned as both a legal doctrine and a practical expression of state authority.

However, contemporary scholarship has problematized the Westphalian narrative. Osiander (2001) and Stirk (2012) argue that the conventional reading of Westphalia as the definitive birth of modern sovereignty oversimplifies historical realities. Krasner (1999) further destabilizes the concept by distinguishing between international legal sovereignty, Westphalian sovereignty, domestic sovereignty, and interdependence sovereignty, thereby revealing sovereignty as historically contingent and frequently violated in practice. Sovereignty, in this sense, is not absolute but structured by power asymmetries and institutional interdependence.

For postcolonial states, sovereignty carries additional complexities. Ayoob (2002) contends that the experience of state formation in the Global South diverges significantly from that of early European states. Many postcolonial states inherited juridical sovereignty without the prolonged historical processes of institutional consolidation that characterized European state development. Consequently, sovereignty in the Global South is often externally recognized yet internally fragile. This disjuncture is particularly evident in Africa.

Juridical Sovereignty

Juridical sovereignty refers to formal recognition within international society. It denotes legal equality among states, territorial integrity, diplomatic representation, and protection under international law (Fowler & Bunck, 1996; Krasner, 1999). Following decolonization, African states were rapidly incorporated into international society as juridically sovereign actors (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982). Membership in the United Nations and other multilateral institutions symbolized formal equality with older European states.

Jackson (1990) famously described many African states as quasi states, entities that enjoy external recognition but lack the internal capacity typically associated with effective sovereignty. Juridical sovereignty, in this formulation, is sustained by international norms that protect weak states from external conquest or absorption, regardless of internal fragility. This framework highlights the paradox of postcolonial statehood: legal sovereignty may persist even where administrative reach, economic control, and coercive capacity are limited.

In Africa, juridical sovereignty has proven durable. Despite internal conflict, economic crisis, and regime instability, African states have largely maintained territorial boundaries established at independence, reflecting the Organization of African Unity's early commitment to territorial integrity (Herbst, 2000). The sanctity of borders reinforces juridical sovereignty but does not necessarily ensure substantive autonomy.

Substantive Autonomy

Substantive autonomy refers to the empirical capacity of a state to exercise meaningful control over its domestic and external affairs. It encompasses institutional strength, economic independence, policy discretion, and coercive authority (Englebert, 2009; Jackson, 1990). Whereas juridical sovereignty is externally conferred, substantive autonomy is internally constructed.

In the African context, substantive autonomy has been constrained by structural dependency, weak institutional consolidation, and fragmented legitimacy (Ake, 1996; Clapham, 1996). Colonial administrative systems were not designed to cultivate accountable governance or diversified economies, but rather to facilitate extraction and control (Mamdani, 1996; Rodney, 1972). Post-independence regimes inherited centralized bureaucratic

structures without corresponding economic foundations, limiting their capacity to generate autonomous development strategies (Mkandawire, 2015).

Economic dependency further constrains substantive autonomy. Dependency theorists argue that peripheral states are structurally integrated into global capitalist hierarchies in subordinate positions (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Frank, 1966; Wallerstein, 1974). For many African states, export dependence on primary commodities, vulnerability to debt crises, and reliance on foreign aid reduce policy flexibility and reinforce external influence (Alden & Large, 2018; Brown & Harman, 2013). Substantive autonomy, therefore, cannot be reduced to legal recognition; it requires economic diversification, institutional capacity, and strategic leverage.

Security dependency also complicates autonomy. International peacekeeping missions, counterterrorism partnerships, and military assistance programs often embed African states within global security architectures (Murithi, 2013; Williams, 2011). While such arrangements may enhance short term stability, they can simultaneously circumscribe sovereign decision making.

Sovereign Identity

Beyond legal status and material capacity, sovereignty is deeply intertwined with identity and legitimacy. Sovereign identity refers to the internal cohesion, collective self understanding, and normative legitimacy that underpin state authority. It reflects the extent to which citizens recognize the state as a legitimate political community (Englebert, 1997; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

African national identities were shaped within colonial borders that often amalgamated diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups (Ekeh, 1975; Mamdani, 1996). The persistence of bifurcated citizenship and ethno regional loyalties complicates national cohesion (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Empirical studies show that ethnic identification frequently competes with national identification across African societies (Posner, 2004; Robinson, 2014). Where national identity remains contested, state authority is weakened and substantive autonomy is undermined.

Mbembe (2001) conceptualizes postcolonial sovereignty as performative, sustained through spectacle, ritual, and coercion rather than deep institutional legitimacy. In such contexts, sovereignty becomes symbolic rather than substantive. Sovereign identity crises thus intersect with material dependency, reinforcing the gap between juridical recognition and empirical authority.

Regional and Pooled Sovereignty

Recent developments complicate traditional understandings of sovereignty as exclusively national. Regional integration initiatives such as the African Union and the African Continental Free Trade Area reflect experiments in pooled sovereignty (African Union, 2020; UNECA, 2023). Pooled sovereignty refers to the voluntary sharing of authority across states to enhance collective bargaining power and policy coordination. Murithi (2013) argues that the African Union's doctrine of nonindifference signals a normative evolution beyond rigid nonintervention. Similarly, AfCFTA seeks to reduce dependency on external markets by expanding intra African trade. However, the effectiveness of pooled sovereignty depends on domestic institutional strength and political will (Zondi, 2018). Without internal consolidation, regionalism may reproduce symbolic integration rather than substantive transformation.

Digital Sovereignty

The concept of sovereignty has expanded further in the digital era. Digital sovereignty refers to state authority over data governance, technological infrastructure, and cyberspace regulation (Ayoade, 2020; Turianskyi & Feldman, 2022). In Africa, digital infrastructure is often financed and managed by foreign corporations, raising concerns about technological dependency and data extraction (IISD, 2024). Digital activism has simultaneously challenged state narratives and reshaped political legitimacy (Bhabha & Nyamnjoh, 2020). Thus, sovereignty now operates across both physical and digital domains. Substantive autonomy in the twenty first century requires not only territorial control but also regulatory authority over digital systems and information flows.

Reconceptualizing African Statehood

Taken together, these conceptual strands reveal sovereignty as multilayered. Juridical sovereignty provides formal recognition. Substantive autonomy reflects empirical capacity. Sovereign identity captures legitimacy and cohesion. Regional and digital sovereignty introduce collective and technological dimensions. The African case demonstrates that these layers do not always align. States may possess juridical sovereignty while lacking substantive autonomy or cohesive sovereign identity. Conversely, emerging regional and digital initiatives suggest partial reconstitution of autonomy through new institutional arrangements.

This study therefore conceptualizes African statehood as a layered construct in which sovereignty is neither wholly hollow nor fully consolidated. Instead, it is structured by the interaction of legal recognition, institutional capacity, economic independence, identity cohesion, and technological authority. Understanding the divergence and interaction among these dimensions provides the foundation for analyzing the contemporary paradox of juridical sovereignty versus substantive autonomy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts Dependency Theory as its analytical framework to explain the divergence between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy in African states. Dependency Theory emerged as a critique of modernization theory, arguing that underdevelopment in the Global South is not a transitional stage but a structural outcome of integration into a hierarchical global capitalist system (Frank, 1966; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Wallerstein, 1974). Rather than viewing states as isolated units progressing along a universal developmental path, dependency scholars conceptualize the international system as divided between core and peripheral zones. Core states control capital, technology, and global institutions, while peripheral states are structurally positioned as suppliers of raw materials and consumers of manufactured goods.

Applied to Africa, Dependency Theory offers a structural explanation for constrained autonomy. Colonial incorporation integrated African economies into global markets in subordinate roles, a pattern that largely persisted after independence (Rodney, 1972; Ake, 1996). Although African states achieved juridical sovereignty through decolonization, their economic structures remained externally oriented and commodity dependent. This structural positioning limited policy flexibility, fiscal independence, and long term developmental planning (Mkandawire, 2015). As a result, formal sovereignty coexisted with material constraints.

Dependency extends beyond trade. External debt, conditional lending, and structural adjustment programs embedded many African states within policy frameworks shaped by international financial institutions (Harrison, 2001; Stiglitz, 2002). Security arrangements and peacekeeping partnerships similarly reflect asymmetrical interdependence (Murithi, 2013; Williams, 2011). Even in the digital era, reliance on foreign technological infrastructure and data systems introduces new forms of dependency that affect regulatory authority (Ayoade, 2020; Turianskyi & Feldman, 2022). These dynamics illustrate how substantive autonomy is mediated by structural hierarchies.

Dependency Theory thus clarifies the central paradox examined in this study. Juridical sovereignty persists because international norms uphold territorial integrity and legal equality (Jackson, 1990; Krasner, 1999). However, substantive autonomy depends on economic diversification, institutional capacity, and control over strategic sectors. Where structural dependency endures, autonomy remains limited despite formal recognition.

At the same time, Dependency Theory does not imply the absence of agency. Peripheral states may negotiate, diversify partnerships, or pursue regional integration as strategies to mitigate vulnerability (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Alden & Large, 2018). Initiatives such as continental economic integration reflect attempts to reposition African states within the global system. Nonetheless, such efforts operate within enduring structural constraints.

In this study, Dependency Theory provides a structural lens for understanding why African states often possess juridical sovereignty without corresponding substantive autonomy. By situating sovereignty within global hierarchies of production, finance, technology, and security, the framework explains the persistent gap between legal recognition and material agency in contemporary African statehood.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the divergence between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy in African states. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to interpret complex political, economic, and institutional processes rather than measure quantifiable variables. The aim was explanatory and analytical rather than statistical generalization. Comparative case analysis allowed for a structured, in-depth examination of how sovereignty operated across different national contexts while identifying recurring patterns and variation. The comparative design followed a structured focused comparison logic. Each case was examined through the same analytical questions: the nature of juridical sovereignty, the degree of substantive autonomy, the role of structural dependency, and the impact of institutional and identity factors on external agency. This approach enhanced internal consistency and theoretical coherence.

Case Selection

Three African states are selected as empirical cases: Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia. The cases were chosen purposively based on variation in geopolitical positioning, economic structure, regional influence, and internal political dynamics.

Nigeria represents a regional power with strong juridical standing and diplomatic visibility, particularly within West Africa. However, its oil dependent economy and internal security challenges raise questions about substantive autonomy.

Burkina Faso represents a case of political volatility and geopolitical realignment. Its oscillation between radical sovereignty rhetoric and strategic alignment with external powers provides insight into how dependency and autonomy interact under conditions of instability.

Ethiopia presents a distinctive case of symbolic sovereignty. As host of the African Union and a state that historically resisted colonial occupation, Ethiopia occupies a strong normative position within African diplomacy. Yet internal fragmentation and conflict complicate its substantive autonomy.

Together, these cases provide analytical diversity while remaining comparable within the broader African context.

Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on secondary qualitative data. Sources include

1.   Scholarly literature on African sovereignty, dependency, and statehood

2.   Policy documents from national governments, the African Union, and regional organizations

3.   Reports from international institutions and development agencies

4.   Credible media reports and official communiqués

5.   Historical and institutional records relevant to each case

The use of multiple sources enables triangulation and strengthens analytical validity. Data are drawn from peer reviewed publications and institutional documents to ensure reliability and academic rigor.

Method of Data Analysis

The study employs thematic content analysis. Key themes derived from the theoretical framework guide the analysis, including

• Economic dependency

• Institutional capacity

• Security interdependence

• Sovereign identity and legitimacy

• Regional and diplomatic engagement

Data are systematically reviewed and coded according to these categories. Patterns are then compared across cases to determine how structural dependency conditions substantive autonomy despite juridical sovereignty.

The analysis remains theory driven. Dependency Theory provides the interpretive lens through which empirical findings are evaluated. Rather than testing a hypothesis quantitatively, the study assesses whether observed patterns align with the structural logic of dependency.

Scope and Time Frame

The study focused on the post Cold War period, with particular emphasis on developments from the early 2000s to 2024. This period captures major transformations in global political economy, including structural adjustment legacies, renewed geopolitical competition, and digital governance expansion. The time frame allows examination of both continuity and change in African sovereignty.

Limitations

As a qualitative study relying on secondary data, the research does not incorporate primary interviews or quantitative measurement. While this limits direct engagement with policymakers or citizens, it ensures analytical breadth across multiple contexts. Additionally, the selection of three cases does not aim for continental generalization but for theoretical insight. The objective is conceptual refinement rather than statistical representativeness.

Despite these limitations, the comparative qualitative design provides sufficient depth to interrogate the structural conditions shaping African sovereignty. The methodology aligns with the study's theoretical orientation and enables systematic examination of the paradox between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, applying the theoretical framework to the selected cases of Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia. The analysis examines how juridical sovereignty coexists with varying degrees of substantive autonomy across different political and economic contexts. Guided by Dependency Theory, the results focus on four interrelated dimensions: economic structure, institutional capacity, security dynamics, and sovereign identity.

Nigeria: Regional Influence under Structural Constraint

Nigeria represents one of the clearest illustrations of the paradox between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy. As Africa's most populous country and one of its largest economies, Nigeria occupies a central position in continental diplomacy. It has played decisive roles in regional peacekeeping operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone, remains influential within the Economic Community of West African States, and consistently asserts leadership ambitions within African multilateral platforms. Its juridical sovereignty is robust. Nigeria

maintains recognized territorial integrity, participates actively in global institutions, and exercises formal diplomatic equality within the international system. There is no contestation of its legal statehood.

However, the empirical evidence demonstrates that juridical sovereignty does not translate seamlessly into substantive autonomy. The first major constraint arises from economic structure. Nigeria's heavy reliance on crude oil exports has entrenched a mono commodity economy vulnerable to global price volatility. Oil revenues account for a dominant share of export earnings and a significant portion of government revenue. As a result, fiscal planning and macroeconomic stability are deeply influenced by fluctuations in global energy markets rather than purely domestic policy design. When global oil prices decline, public spending contracts, debt increases, and currency pressures intensify. This structural dependence narrows policy autonomy and constrains long term developmental planning.

The resource dependence dynamic also reinforces external financial exposure. Nigeria has periodically relied on external borrowing to stabilize its economy during downturns. Debt servicing obligations, exchange rate pressures, and investor confidence considerations limit discretionary fiscal policy. From a dependency perspective, this illustrates how integration into global commodity markets conditions domestic sovereignty. Formal authority over economic policy exists, yet structural vulnerability reduces meaningful autonomy.

A second constraint emerges in the domain of security and territorial control. Although Nigeria retains formal authority over its territory, persistent insecurity challenges the state's effective control. The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, armed banditry in the northwest, farmer herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and separatist tensions in the southeast have exposed uneven state capacity. In regions affected by insurgency, the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force is contested. While Nigeria's territorial boundaries remain intact in juridical terms, effective sovereignty is fragmented in practice.

Security cooperation with external actors further illustrates the layered character of autonomy. Nigeria has engaged in intelligence sharing, military training partnerships, and multilateral counterterrorism arrangements. Although such cooperation enhances operational capacity, it simultaneously embeds the state within broader security architectures shaped by external strategic interests. Substantive autonomy in security policy is therefore interdependent rather than absolute.

Third, internal identity fragmentation complicates state consolidation. Nigeria's federal structure reflects deep ethno regional diversity. Political competition frequently aligns with ethnic, religious, and regional cleavages. These divisions affect governance outcomes, resource distribution, and perceptions of legitimacy. Where citizens identify more strongly with subnational communities than with the national project, institutional cohesion weakens. Fragmented sovereign identity reduces the state's ability to mobilize unified domestic support for strategic economic reforms or coherent foreign policy initiatives.

Moreover, oil revenue politics intersect with identity fragmentation. Resource allocation disputes and perceptions of marginalization reinforce distrust between regions. In the Niger Delta, environmental degradation and economic grievances have historically generated militancy and demands for greater resource control. This dynamic underscores how economic dependency and identity politics converge to constrain substantive autonomy.

Despite these constraints, Nigeria demonstrates areas of negotiated agency. It continues to exercise diplomatic influence within West Africa and has historically played a stabilizing role in regional crises. Its participation in AfCFTA negotiations and continental economic initiatives reflects attempts to diversify economic partnerships and enhance collective bargaining power. However, these efforts remain conditioned by structural vulnerabilities.

In sum, Nigeria's experience confirms the central theoretical proposition of this study. Juridical sovereignty is intact and institutionally reinforced through regional leadership and global participation. Yet substantive autonomy remains constrained by commodity dependence, fiscal exposure, security fragmentation, and contested sovereign identity. Nigeria illustrates that sovereignty in contemporary Africa operates in layers. Legal recognition and diplomatic visibility coexist with structural economic and institutional limitations. The Nigerian

case therefore provides a foundational empirical anchor for understanding the broader paradox of African statehood examined in this study.

Burkina Faso: Sovereignty Rhetoric and Geopolitical Realignment

Burkina Faso presents a case in which juridical sovereignty remains intact, yet substantive autonomy is deeply shaped by institutional fragility, economic vulnerability, and shifting external alignments. Unlike Nigeria, which projects regional influence despite structural constraints, Burkina Faso's experience illustrates how sovereignty can become politically mobilized as a discourse of resistance while remaining materially conditioned by dependency and insecurity.

First, in juridical terms, Burkina Faso retains full international recognition. Its territorial boundaries are legally protected, and it continues to participate in regional and global institutions. Despite repeated military coups and constitutional disruptions, there has been no erosion of its legal status as a sovereign state. The international system has upheld its territorial integrity, demonstrating the durability of juridical sovereignty even amid domestic instability.

However, substantive autonomy is significantly constrained by institutional weakness. Since 2014, Burkina Faso has experienced recurring political transitions, including military interventions justified on grounds of restoring security and national dignity. These disruptions reflect limited institutional consolidation. Weak civilian oversight, fragile governance structures, and limited administrative reach undermine domestic sovereignty in practice. While the state maintains formal authority, its capacity to uniformly enforce order across its territory has been compromised, particularly in areas affected by insurgency.

The security crisis in the Sahel region further illustrates the gap between juridical sovereignty and effective control. Armed insurgent groups have expanded operations across northern and eastern Burkina Faso, challenging the state's monopoly over coercive power. Large segments of territory have experienced reduced state presence. In such contexts, sovereignty becomes territorially uneven. Formal authority exists, yet effective governance is fragmented.

In response to security challenges, Burkina Faso has reconfigured its external partnerships. The expulsion of traditional Western military forces and the subsequent strengthening of ties with alternative security partners have been framed domestically as acts of sovereign reclamation. Political rhetoric emphasizes independence from perceived neo colonial influence and the restoration of national dignity. This narrative has resonated among segments of the population, particularly in the context of anti Western sentiment in parts of the Sahel.

However, from a structural perspective, geopolitical realignment does not necessarily equate to substantive autonomy. Shifting from one external partner to another does not eliminate dependency; it may simply alter its configuration. Reliance on foreign security assistance, regardless of source, indicates continued interdependence in strategic affairs. Moreover, Burkina Faso's limited economic diversification and fiscal vulnerability constrain its bargaining power within any partnership.

Economic structure further limits autonomy. Burkina Faso's economy remains dependent on gold exports and agricultural production, both of which are sensitive to global market fluctuations. Limited industrialization and infrastructural constraints reduce domestic revenue generation and development capacity. This economic profile narrows policy flexibility and reinforces external reliance for investment and stabilization.

Sovereign identity also plays a significant role in this case. The political leadership has deployed sovereignty as a unifying nationalist narrative, framing regime change as resistance to foreign domination. While such rhetoric strengthens symbolic sovereignty, the persistence of insecurity and economic fragility complicates efforts to translate nationalist discourse into sustained institutional reform. Where sovereignty becomes primarily rhetorical, it risks masking structural limitations rather than overcoming them.

Burkina Faso therefore illustrates a distinct configuration of the sovereignty paradox. Juridical sovereignty is secure and politically invoked. Yet substantive autonomy remains constrained by weak institutional capacity,

economic vulnerability, and security dependency. The case demonstrates that sovereignty can be assertively articulated in political discourse while remaining materially mediated by structural conditions.

Compared to Nigeria, where regional leadership coexists with economic and security constraints, Burkina Faso represents a more fragile form of sovereignty in which institutional instability amplifies dependency dynamics. The findings reinforce the central argument of the study: juridical sovereignty alone does not guarantee substantive autonomy. Instead, autonomy depends on the alignment of economic structure, institutional strength, security control, and cohesive sovereign identity.

Continental Patterns: The Juridical–Substantive Sovereignty Gap Across Africa

Beyond the specific trajectories of Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia, the comparative analysis reveals broader continental patterns that reinforce the study's central argument. While the cases vary in historical experience, political structure, and geopolitical positioning, they converge around a persistent gap between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy. This section synthesizes those patterns and situates them within the wider African context.

The first notable finding is the remarkable durability of juridical sovereignty across Africa. Since independence, African states have largely preserved inherited colonial borders. Even in contexts of prolonged conflict, coups, or regime collapse, international recognition has rarely been withdrawn. Territorial integrity remains protected by both international norms and continental commitments.

This durability reflects the strength of the principle of sovereign equality in global governance. African states continue to enjoy formal diplomatic standing, representation in international institutions, and protection under international law. Thus, at the juridical level, sovereignty is stable and resilient.

However, the endurance of legal recognition should not be conflated with substantive autonomy. Juridical sovereignty provides formal equality but does not eliminate structural constraints.

Economic Structure and Policy Constraint

Across the continent, economic dependency remains a structural constant. Many African economies are characterized by export concentration in primary commodities, limited industrial diversification, and exposure to global market volatility. Whether oil in Nigeria, gold in Burkina Faso, or externally financed infrastructure in Ethiopia, economic structures remain externally oriented.

Commodity dependence constrains fiscal stability and narrows policy flexibility. Debt servicing obligations and reliance on foreign investment further limit discretionary economic decision making. Even where governments articulate developmental strategies, structural positioning within global markets mediates their capacity to implement autonomous economic transformation.

The comparative evidence therefore confirms that substantive autonomy in Africa is deeply conditioned by economic structure. Juridical sovereignty may guarantee legal authority over economic policy, yet structural dependency reduces meaningful autonomy in practice.

A second continental pattern concerns security interdependence. Across multiple regions, states confront insurgency, transnational crime, or border insecurity. In response, governments frequently engage in security cooperation arrangements, peacekeeping missions, or external military partnerships.

While such cooperation may strengthen short term operational capacity, it embeds states within broader strategic frameworks shaped by external actors. Sovereignty in the security domain becomes relational rather than absolute. The monopoly over the legitimate use of force, often treated as a core element of sovereignty, is exercised within networks of interdependence.

The findings suggest that substantive autonomy in security policy is uneven and often mediated by external support. Juridical sovereignty remains intact, yet strategic independence is negotiated rather than unilateral.

The comparative analysis also highlights the role of sovereign identity in shaping autonomy. Internal fragmentation, whether along ethnic, regional, or political lines, weakens institutional consolidation and policy coherence.

Where national identity is contested, governance becomes politicized and state legitimacy is strained. Fragmented identity reduces the state's ability to mobilize collective support for long term economic reforms or assertive foreign policy initiatives. Substantive autonomy is therefore not solely an economic or institutional issue; it is also rooted in domestic cohesion.

Across the cases, internal identity tensions indirectly reinforce structural vulnerability. Sovereign identity emerges as a critical yet often underestimated dimension of autonomy.

Emerging Efforts at Reconstituting Autonomy

Despite these constraints, the findings also reveal continental efforts aimed at restructuring autonomy. Regional economic integration, diplomatic diversification, and developmental nationalism reflect attempts to reposition African states within global hierarchies.

Continental initiatives such as expanded intra African trade frameworks signal a collective strategy to reduce external dependency. Likewise, engagement with multiple global partners represents a diversification strategy intended to expand bargaining space.

However, these efforts remain embedded within structural conditions that limit their transformative capacity. Autonomy is being renegotiated, but not fully consolidated.

DISCUSSION Of FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a persistent structural divergence between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy in African statehood. Across Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Ethiopia, juridical sovereignty remains intact and internationally reinforced. Territorial integrity is preserved, diplomatic recognition is secure, and participation in global and regional institutions continues uninterrupted. Even in moments of internal instability or political rupture, the formal legal status of these states has not been fundamentally questioned. This durability affirms the strength of international norms protecting sovereign equality and territorial preservation. However, the stability of juridical sovereignty does not automatically translate into consolidated material autonomy.

The empirical evidence demonstrates that substantive autonomy, understood as the effective capacity to independently shape economic, security, and developmental trajectories, remains structurally mediated. Economic structure emerged as a decisive variable across all cases. Nigeria's oil dependence, Burkina Faso's reliance on gold exports, and Ethiopia's externally financed development model illustrate how integration into global economic hierarchies conditions policy flexibility. Commodity concentration and financial exposure narrow fiscal discretion and subject domestic planning to global market fluctuations. While governments retain formal authority over economic policy, their capacity to act independently is shaped by structural positioning within international markets. In this respect, the findings reaffirm the central insight of Dependency Theory that peripheral integration into global capitalism constrains autonomous development.

Yet the results also complicate deterministic interpretations of dependency. The cases reveal strategic maneuvering within structural constraints. Nigeria leverages regional diplomacy, Ethiopia advances ambitious infrastructure projects to assert developmental sovereignty, and Burkina Faso reframes geopolitical alignments in the language of sovereign reclamation. These actions indicate that agency persists within dependency, albeit in negotiated and constrained forms. Structural forces shape possibilities, but they do not eliminate political choice. Substantive autonomy therefore operates within limits rather than in complete absence.

Security dynamics further underscore the relational character of sovereignty. In all three contexts, security challenges have produced forms of interdependence. External military partnerships, intelligence cooperation, and multilateral security arrangements illustrate that sovereignty in the coercive domain is exercised within

networks of cooperation. Rather than reflecting erosion of sovereignty, these arrangements demonstrate its transformation. Autonomy in security policy is no longer synonymous with isolation; it is mediated through institutionalized interdependence. However, such interdependence also constrains unilateral strategic discretion, reinforcing the layered nature of sovereignty.

The findings also highlight the foundational importance of sovereign identity. Internal cohesion and legitimacy directly influence the consolidation of autonomy. Where national identity is fragmented, institutional consolidation weakens and policy coherence suffers. Nigeria's ethno regional divisions, Burkina Faso's political volatility, and Ethiopia's ethnic federal tensions reveal how domestic legitimacy shapes external agency. Sovereignty is not sustained by legal recognition alone but by the degree to which citizens recognize and support the state as a legitimate political community. Fragmented sovereign identity indirectly amplifies vulnerability to external pressure by weakening internal resilience.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that sovereignty in contemporary Africa is multilayered rather than binary. The conventional dichotomy between sovereign and non sovereign states obscures the empirical complexity observed across cases. Juridical sovereignty exists as a stable legal layer. Substantive autonomy fluctuates across economic, institutional, and security domains. Sovereign identity forms a normative layer that underpins or undermines material capacity. These layers do not always align. A state may exhibit strong symbolic authority and diplomatic visibility while facing structural economic constraint. Another may assert sovereignty rhetorically while remaining dependent on external security arrangements.

The study therefore advances a reconceptualization of African statehood. Sovereignty is neither wholly hollow nor fully consolidated. It is negotiated within global hierarchies, mediated by structural dependency, and shaped by domestic cohesion. Rather than treating sovereignty as a fixed attribute acquired at independence, the findings portray it as an evolving process that unfolds across economic, institutional, and normative dimensions.

This interpretation carries broader implications for international relations theory. It challenges Eurocentric assumptions that sovereignty is uniform once juridically granted. The African experience demonstrates that formal equality in international law coexists with material inequality in global political economy. At the same time, it complicates narratives of complete dependency by demonstrating spaces of negotiated agency and regional experimentation. Sovereignty in Africa is dynamic, contested, and layered, reflecting both structural constraint and strategic adaptation.

CONCLUSION

The central conclusion drawn from this study is that juridical sovereignty in Africa is not the primary problem; the core challenge lies in the consolidation of substantive autonomy. The findings demonstrate that African states do not suffer from absence of legal recognition or territorial legitimacy. Rather, they face structural constraints that limit their capacity to convert formal sovereignty into sustained economic independence, strategic flexibility, and institutional coherence.

From the comparative analysis, it can be concluded that the gap between juridical sovereignty and substantive autonomy is structural rather than incidental. Economic dependency, security interdependence, and institutional fragility are not temporary disruptions but embedded features of the global political economy within which African states operate. This means that autonomy cannot be achieved through rhetorical assertion, regime change, or diplomatic realignment alone. Without transformation of underlying economic and institutional foundations, sovereignty remains formally intact but materially circumscribed.

The study further concludes that sovereignty in Africa operates as a layered condition. Legal sovereignty provides international protection and diplomatic space, but substantive autonomy depends on alignment across economic resilience, institutional strength, and cohesive sovereign identity. Where these dimensions are fragmented, autonomy remains partial. Where they are strengthened, the space for independent agency expands. Sovereignty therefore functions as a spectrum rather than a binary status.

Another conclusion emerging from the findings is that dependency does not eliminate agency but conditions it. African states retain the capacity to negotiate, diversify partnerships, and pursue regional integration. However, such strategies operate within structural limits imposed by global hierarchies of production, finance, and technology. The implication is that autonomy must be pursued through strategic structural transformation rather than through symbolic assertions of independence.

Finally, the study concludes that rethinking African statehood requires shifting analytical focus away from debates over state failure or sovereignty erosion and toward the structural determinants of autonomy. The persistence of juridical sovereignty indicates that African states are firmly embedded in international society. The pressing question is how to deepen substantive autonomy within that system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that strengthening substantive autonomy in African states requires multidimensional transformation rather than reliance on juridical sovereignty alone. Since legal recognition and territorial integrity are already entrenched within international norms, the central task is consolidating material capacity, institutional depth, and internal legitimacy.

Economic restructuring is central to this process. Heavy dependence on primary commodity exports continues to expose many African states to global price volatility and fiscal instability. Diversification strategies that promote value addition, regional production chains, agro processing, and technological upgrading can expand domestic revenue bases and reduce vulnerability to external shocks. Continental trade frameworks should be deepened in ways that stimulate intra African markets and reduce excessive reliance on external demand. Sustainable industrial policy, combined with investment in human capital and infrastructure, can gradually expand policy space and strengthen economic sovereignty.

Fiscal autonomy also requires disciplined management of public debt and external financing. Transparent borrowing practices, improved domestic revenue mobilization, and strengthened tax administration systems can enhance financial independence. Addressing illicit financial flows and broadening taxable economic sectors would further reduce structural reliance on externally conditioned lending arrangements. Expanding fiscal capacity is essential for translating formal authority into developmental agency.

Institutional consolidation remains equally vital. Durable governance institutions, credible rule of law mechanisms, professional civil services, and accountable security sectors are necessary for converting sovereignty from symbolic status into effective authority. Where institutions are predictable and legitimate, states are better positioned to negotiate international partnerships on more balanced terms. Institutional strength reduces vulnerability to external leverage and enhances long term policy coherence.

National cohesion and inclusive identity formation also play a decisive role. Sovereignty is sustained not only through international recognition but through domestic legitimacy. Addressing regional marginalization, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and strengthening inclusive citizenship frameworks can reinforce public trust in state institutions. Greater internal cohesion enhances resilience against both internal fragmentation and external pressure.

Strategic engagement with global partners should prioritize diversification and pragmatic diplomacy. Expanding partnerships across multiple actors may increase bargaining leverage, but such diversification must be anchored in clearly defined national development strategies. Substitution of one dependency for another does not produce autonomy. Collective regional negotiation platforms can enhance bargaining strength and mitigate asymmetrical bilateral relationships.

Technological governance must be integrated into broader autonomy strategies. Regulatory frameworks that protect data sovereignty, encourage domestic technological innovation, and build cybersecurity capacity are increasingly necessary in a digitalized global economy. Investment in local technological ecosystems and regional digital cooperation can reduce long term vulnerability to external technological dominance.

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