

Bigotry Politics: Elite Capture, Religious Instrumentalism, and the Fate of the Nigerian State

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Nigeria's persistent state fragility and negative trajectory are not accidental outcomes but the direct consequence of a predatory political elite's calculated strategy. This negative fate is driven by the convergence of two core mechanisms: Elite Capture (the structural drive) and Religious Instrumentalism (the operational tool). Drawing on Elite Theory, the Instrumentalism framework, and Historical Institutionalism, the objective of the study seeks to demonstrate that Elite Capture provides the structural drive (who benefits), while Religious Instrumentalism provides the operational tool (how they achieve it). Using conceptual and analytical design supported by qualitative, illustrative case validation; 2023 Nigerian general election, assert these mechanisms reveal a powerful path-dependent trajectory for the Nigerian state, the paper conceptualizes this not as an inescapable trap, but as an unstable equilibrium vulnerable to disruption at critical junctures. Thus, the analysis posits that a dominant political class, engaged in primitive accumulation, systematically subverts democratic processes through a three-part mechanism designed to maintain exclusionary rule and deflect accountability. First, the elite effectuates the Capture by corrupting influential religious gatekeepers through lavish state patronage and illicit financial transactions, trading their moral authority for material gain. Second, these captured religious proxies are instrumentalized for the Weaponization of bigotry, reframing political competition as an existential ethno-religious struggle to polarize the masses. The resulting mass disarray is cynically utilized as a covert to divert public focus away from elite corruption and misgovernance. The cumulative effect of this self-serving system is the erosion of the social contract, the loss of the state's monopoly on violence, and perpetual political and economic stagnation. The paper concludes by recommending targeted institutional reforms, such as the Institutionalization of Patronage Accountability and a Conflict-Triggered Financial Oversight Mechanism to directly dismantle the elite's dual strategy and steer the nation toward genuine development.

Keywords: Elite Capture, Religious Instrumentalism, Primitive Accumulation, Exclusionary Politics, State Fragility, Accountability Smokescreen

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria presents a profound paradox: a nation blessed with immense human and natural resources, yet perpetually crippled by instability, endemic corruption, and cyclical ethno-religious violence. This persistent fragility, which has driven leading scholars to describe the nation as a near or outright failed state (Rotberg & Campbell, 2021), is not an accident of history but the outcome of a deliberate, self-serving political calculus. This paper argues that the enduring fragility and negative path of the Nigerian state is directly caused by a predatory political elite that systematically captures and corrupts the religious leadership, using Religious Instrumentalism to weaponize bigotry, cultivate mass disarray, and deflect accountability. This analysis will demonstrate that Elite Capture provides the structural drive (who benefits), while Religious Instrumentalism provides the operational tool (how they achieve it), together driving the negative trajectory of the Nigerian state.

Methodologically, this study is a conceptual and analytical paper supported by qualitative, illustrative case validation. Rather than a strictly empirical or quantitative tracking exercise, the paper develops a structural framework to analyze the mechanics of state fragility. Furthermore, to move past purely deterministic models of

state failure, this analysis utilizes Historical Institutionalism. By examining Nigeria's political economy through the lens of path dependency, we can identify "critical junctures"—moments of structural fluidity where institutional variation, civic resistance, and genuine policy reform become possible.

The Objective of the Study

To demonstrate that Elite Capture provides the structural drive (who benefits), while Religious Instrumentalism provides the operational tool (how they achieve it), together shaping the negative trajectory of the Nigerian state.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the drivers of Nigeria's instability requires a multi-theoretical lens focused on power distribution, identity manipulation, and institutional path dependency. Thus, elite theory, Religious Instrumentalism, and Historical Institutionalism will be used to underpin this work.

Elite Theory of the Predatory State

Classical Elite Theory, pioneered by figures like Vilfredo Pareto (1935) and Gaetano Mosca (1939), asserts that all societies are ruled by a dominant, organized minority whose primary goal is the control and maintenance of power. In Nigeria, this translates into a political class defined by primitive accumulation; the ruthless and sustained acquisition of state wealth through plunder and corruption (Ihonvbere, 2009). The key concept, Elite Capture, describes how this minority subverts and corrupts key state institutions, resources, and social sectors for private gain. Odubajo and Alabi (2018) emphasize this Elite Factor in Nigeria's political-power dynamics, showing that elite domination limits genuine mass participation. The resulting political system is defined by exclusionary politics (Bolarinwa & Osuji, 2022), where the elite deliberately undermines democratic processes to secure their minority rule, reinforcing the threat of turning Nigeria into a fragile state.

Religious Instrumentalism and Identity Mobilization

The method used to sustain this exclusionary political system is Religious Instrumentalism, which is the strategic and calculated use of religious beliefs and identities by political actors for secular political gain, namely power, legitimacy, and wealth (Brass, 1997). This instrumentalist view, as demonstrated by Yusufu Bala Usman's seminal work, *The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria* (1987), contends that ethno-religious conflicts are often manufactured or inflamed by elites rather than arising purely from genuine theological differences. The nexus between identity and elite strategy is crucial. McCauley (2020) highlights how national-level accounts emphasize the machinations of national or party elite in exacerbating identity cleavages for political gain. Similarly, Sufyan and Dauda (2025) detail various strategies of political manipulation employed by Nigerian elites, including the use of linguistic framing and black boxing of issues to conceal their interests behind the smokescreen of identity. This heavily exacerbates the underdevelopment crisis, plunging the Nigerian state into grave weakness and developmental slumber.

Historical Institutionalism, Path Dependency, and Critical Junctures

While Elite Theory and Instrumentalism explain the structural motives and operational tools of Nigeria's predatory political economy, Historical Institutionalism (HI) provides the tools to understand how these dynamics persist over time, and how they can be broken. A central concept in Historical Institutionalism is path dependency, which suggests that early institutional and political choices set a state on a specific trajectory that becomes self-reinforcing over time due to vested elite interests and high exit costs. The predatory alliance between the political class and captured religious gatekeepers can be understood as a deeply entrenched path-dependent cycle in Nigeria.

Crucially, Historical Institutionalism rejects absolute determinism; trajectories are never permanently sealed. Instead, states experience critical junctures; stark periods of significant structural crisis, electoral realignment, or institutional fluidity where the traditional constraints of path dependency loosen, human agency is amplified,

and the possibility for structural variation or institutional reform emerges. By integrating this lens, this paper frames Nigeria's systemic fragility not as an inevitable or permanent trap, but as a highly volatile, contested path dependency that remains structurally vulnerable to disruption.

Research Design and Data Sources

To ensure analytical clarity, it is necessary to explicitly outline the methodological approach of this study. This paper is a conceptual and analytical study that relies on a qualitative, case-illustrative research design. It does not aim to provide a strictly empirical or quantitative data-tracking exercise. Instead, its academic credibility rests on its ability to synthesize distinct theoretical frameworks to offer a robust explanatory model for Nigeria's current political trajectory.

The empirical basis of the argument is grounded in a qualitative analysis of contemporary political events, using the 2023 Nigerian general election as an illustrative case study to validate the conceptual framework. The sources of data collection for this study consist entirely of secondary literature, including:

Peer-reviewed academic studies on the Nigerian political economy, elite power dynamics, and state fragility.

Documented research regarding sub-Saharan patronage networks and elite co-option mechanisms.

Established historical texts and political discourse analyses focusing on the strategic manipulation of ethno-religious identities in Nigeria.

By evaluating these secondary sources against the integrated framework of Elite Theory, Instrumentalism, and Historical Institutionalism, this study maintains high conceptual rigor while remaining firmly anchored in documented political realities.

State Fragility and the Development Crisis

The cumulative effect of Elite Capture and Religious Instrumentalism drives the Nigerian state's negative trajectory. Claude Ake (1996) provided the foundational critique that the African post-colonial state is inherently problematic, designed for domination rather than democratic development, leading to a perpetual development crisis. This failure to deliver fundamental political goods and its inability to maintain a monopoly on violence are the central criteria for its classification as a failed state (Rotberg & Campbell, 2021). Thus, the current condition of the Nigerian state is the logical outcome determined by the ruling elite's predatory methodology.

The Mechanism of Elite-Driven Religious Instrumentalism

The elite's strategy for maintaining power is a structured, three-part mechanism: the Capture, the Weaponization, and the Distraction. This work draws on the 2023 general election in Nigeria to clearly present the academic discourse. The 2023 general election serves as illustrative validation of the Elite Capture and Religious Instrumentalism nexus. The All Progressives Congress (APC) decision to field a Muslim-Muslim ticket (Tinubu-Shettima) bypassed the traditional "religious balance" convention, triggering the mechanism described in this paper.

The Capture: Corrupting the Religious Gatekeepers

The initial and most critical step is the Elite-to-Elite Corrupt Transaction. The political elite, leveraging its control over state patronage and revenue, systematically co-opts influential religious figures, including Imams and Pastors. Political elites intensified material patronage to these religious gatekeepers, a phenomenon visible in the unveiling of the 2023 APC vice-presidential candidate, which allegedly featured hired clerics to simulate endorsement. Beyond theatrics, established religious leaders used sermons to endorse candidates based on divine mandate rather than policy merit, acting as prophetic voices that shaped political alignment (Njoku & Amadife, 2025).

This capture is secured through material corruption, including lavish financial gifts, allocation of state-owned land, lucrative contracts, and non-merit-based appointments. The Religious Elite, once seen as moral gatekeepers, become political proxies who trade their immense moral authority and influence over their congregations for material gain. This co-option is a highly effective strategy of political manipulation. As described by Sufyan and Dauda (2025), elites employ subtle strategies to control information and messaging, with religious platforms serving as a powerful, unquestionable medium for mass communication. The corruption of the religious sphere ensures that a powerful segment of civil society actively legitimizes the corrupt political class, picturing the history in the present for the purpose of this academic discussion.

The Weaponization: Bigotry, Division, and Electoral Strategy

Once captured, the religious leadership is instrumentalized to serve the political agenda. This is where Religious Instrumentalism actively manifests. The party ticket was reframed by opposing elites and captured clerics as an existential threat. This triggered the "Islamization" narrative to mobilize voters for the Labour Party (Peter Obi) as a "defense of the faith," while Northern elites used "Muslim Solidarity" to consolidate votes for the APC. Voting patterns closely mirrored the religious demographics of these regions, fulfilling the elite strategy of using religion as a tool for mobilization rather than spiritual guidance (Salahu, 2023; Usman, 1987). Thus, political competition, which should focus on socio-economic policy and accountability, is deliberately reframed from the pulpits and mosques and through political rhetoric as an existential ethno-religious struggle.

Hence, bigotry is weaponized to divide and strategically place the masses along sectarian lines; systematically marginalizing and ideologically polarizing them, creating an "us versus them" dichotomy essential for securing identity-based votes. This manufactured division makes vote-buying and patronage highly efficient. Funds derived from the corruption of state coffers are channeled through the religious proxies as charity or "empowerment schemes". This method secures electoral compliance by reinforcing identity allegiance and short-term material incentives, thereby marginalizing the masses from genuine political contestation (Odubajo & Alabi, 2018). The ultimate goal is to cement the exclusionary politics of the elite, preventing the emergence of leaders committed to inclusive governance (Bolarinwa & Osuji, 2022).

Through the lens of Historical Institutionalism, however, the 2023 general election can also be analyzed as an incomplete Critical Juncture. The unprecedented rise of a viable third-party alternative, the Labour Party led by Peter Obi, served as a profound structural shock to the established political order. This emergence represented a moment of major systemic fluidity where the elite's traditional, exclusionary grip was actively and aggressively contested by an awakened citizenry. Although the elite ultimately triggered their survival mechanisms, intensifying the "Islamization" and sectarian narratives to force a retreat into identity-based voting. The intense friction of the 2023 cycle empirically proved that the path-dependent system is fundamentally vulnerable to disruption. The elite's control is not permanently sealed; rather, it is an ongoing, heavily contested effort to maintain power.

THE RESULT

The Disarray: Violence as the Accountability Smokescreen

The most cynical element of this mechanism is the political function of the resulting religious violence and mass disarray. Conflicts and crises, whether over grazing land, resource control, or political succession are often inflamed by elite rhetoric, causing widespread communal instability. This violence serves as an indispensable smokescreen (Usman, 1987). When the masses are locked in conflict over primordial identities, their collective focus is diverted away from the true source of their poverty and instability, which is the political elite responsible for misgovernance and corruption. The disarray ensures that a united, mass-based opposition demanding accountability cannot easily coalesce. By creating a climate of fear and division, the elite successfully deflects public scrutiny, consolidates power, and continues its process of primitive accumulation, confirming the predatory nature of the ruling class (Ihonvbere, 2009).

For example, in 2023 while the nation faced a severe Naira redesign crisis and fuel scarcity, the national discourse was heavily consumed by inter-religious bickering, acting as a mass-based diversion. This disarray culminated in targeted voter suppression in multi-ethnic hubs like Lagos. The focus on identity marginalized critical debates on the \$100 billion national debt, securing continued elite control, building toward severe systemic challenges.

CONSEQUENCES

The Trajectory of the Nigerian State

The sustained and cyclical success of this elite strategy has deeply entrenched the negative trajectory of the Nigerian state, pushing it toward systemic collapse. First, the mechanism fundamentally erodes the social contract. The perpetual failure to deliver public goods, coupled with the systemic corruption that fuels the elite's patronage networks (including the religious elite), strips the state of its legitimacy. This erosion is the core factor that leads to the state's eventual inability to maintain order, a defining feature of the "failed state" assessment by Rotberg and Campbell (2021).

Second, the consistent weaponization of ethno-religious cleavages risks the loss of the state's monopoly on violence. As communities lose faith in state security apparatuses, they resort to self-help, leading to the proliferation of non-state armed actors and communal militias. This loss of control over the instruments of coercion is a critical marker of state fragility.

Finally, this instrumentalization blocks institutionalization and impedes genuine political change, reinforcing the continuous circulation of a corrupt elite (Pareto, 1935). As Ake (1996) noted, the state remains configured for domination rather than development, trapping the nation in a cycle of poverty and instability.

SUMMARY

This paper posits that Nigeria's persistent state fragility and negative trajectory are the deliberate consequence of a predatory political elite's strategy. This trajectory is driven by the convergence of two core mechanisms: Elite Capture and Religious Instrumentalism. Elite Capture provides the structural drive; a ruling minority engaged in primitive accumulation and exclusionary politics, while Religious Instrumentalism provides the operational tool. Hence, the elite maintains power through:

The Capture: Corrupting religious leaders through lavish state patronage, effectively turning moral gatekeepers into political proxies.

The Weaponization: Using these captured proxies to reframe political competition as an existential ethno-religious struggle, creating sectarian division for efficient identity-based voting.

The Resulting Disarray: Inflaming communal conflict, religious sectarianism, and banditry tension, which serves as an indispensable smokescreen to deflect mass scrutiny away from elite corruption and misgovernance.

Thus, the cumulative effect of this self-serving system is the erosion of the social contract, the loss of the state's monopoly on violence, and perpetual political and economic stagnation, straitjacketing the Nigerian state into its current fragile condition.

CONCLUSION

The persistent crisis of the Nigerian state is the deliberate consequence of a political economy built on the exploitation of difference. The nexus of Elite Capture and Religious Instrumentalism is the primary driver: a predatory elite corrupts the religious leadership, weaponizes bigotry to divide the populace, and utilizes the resulting violence as a smokescreen to maintain its power and wealth. This calculated system of exclusionary politics has historically locked the country's negative trajectory. However, through the lens of Historical

Institutionalism, this path-dependent trap is not absolute. The structural frictions visible in the 2023 election demonstrate that the system is fundamentally unstable. To steer Nigeria away from this trajectory, the citizenry must collectively leverage future critical junctures, reject engineered ethnic and religious cleavages, and focus their energy on demanding institutional accountability from the elite that profits from their disarray.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The sustained crisis demands systemic interventions that directly dismantle the elite's dual strategy of Capture and Instrumentalism. Recommendations are focused on institutional reform and transparency, rather than generalized calls for good governance.

Institutionalize the 'Office of Patronage Accountability' (OPA)

Referencing the 2023 general election in Nigeria, it illustrates that state fragility is an outcome of elite strategy. By utilizing the Same-Faith Ticket as a focal point, the political class transformed a debate on economic survival into a communal crisis, neutralizing demands for accountability. This cycle confirms the necessity of the proposed Office of Patronage Accountability (OPA). Only by stripping the elite of their ability to co-opt religious gatekeepers can Nigeria dismantle the mechanism of Religious Instrumentalism. Without these structural reforms, the state will remain trapped in a "smokescreen" of disarray, ensuring its trajectory remains toward collapse rather than development.

Target: The Capture of religious and community gatekeepers through illicit state resources.

Action: Establish a new, constitutionally protected anti-corruption commission dedicated to tracking all discretionary expenditures from executive budgets. The OPA must require mandatory, real-time public disclosure of all state land allocations, non-tendered contracts, and grants of ₦50,000,000 or more given to religious organizations and politically exposed persons (PEPs).

Enact the Secularization of Poverty Alleviation Act

This is where faith-based-government Poverty Alleviation exercises should be discouraged.

Target: The Weaponization of faith-based identity for electoral manipulation and resource control.

Action: Legislate a framework that prohibits all faith-based organizations and their leaders from serving as distributors or administrators of federal or state social intervention funds. Distribution must be restricted to non-denominational, geo-political units (e.g., Ward Development Committees, WDC) using traceable, direct-to-recipient digital channels, such as BVN-verified accounts.

Implement the Conflict-Triggered Financial Oversight Mechanism

Target: Neutralizing disarray as an "accountability smokescreen".

Action: Integrate a standing rule into the operational mandate of a key anti-graft agency, mandating an automatic, full forensic audit of the state and local government budgets and security votes in any area experiencing ethno-religious violence that results in 20 or more casualties or prolonged displacement. This "Accountability Trigger" links elite misgovernance directly to mass disarray.

Ethical Approval

I hereby express that ethical approval was obtained for research involving human subjects.

Data Availability

All relevant data are within the manuscript.

Author Note: The author is an alumnus of Taraba State University, Jalingo and University of Jos, Nigeria, and wishes to acknowledge the foundational discipline received in those institutions.

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