Broken Promises or Necessary Pain? An Empirically Grounded Analysis of Nigeria's Tinubu Administration Through the Lens of Social Contract Theory

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ABSTRACT

Since President Bola Ahmed Tinubu assumed office in May 2023, Nigeria has been caught between two competing stories: an official narrative of bold economic reform and a lived reality of deepening poverty. This paper analyses the first three years of the Tinubu administration through social contract theory as its primary analytical lens. Drawing on the foundational works of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, it asks a straightforward question: is the Nigerian government honouring its obligations to its citizens? To answer this, the paper combines qualitative analysis of the original source document with quantitative indicators drawn from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the World Bank, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, and SBM Intelligence. The empirical record is stark: headline inflation rose from 22.4% in May 2023 to a peak of 34.8% by December 2024 (NBS, 2025); food inflation reached 39.9% in November 2024 (NBS, 2024); the national poverty rate climbed from 40.3% in 2018 to 46% in 2023, with an estimated 104 million Nigerians below the poverty line (World Bank, 2023); and kidnapping incidents rose 31% from 2023 to 2024, with nearly 5,000 persons abducted between July 2024 and June 2025 alone (SBM Intelligence, 2025). These numbers confirm that while macroeconomic indicators such as stock exchange performance and federated revenue have improved, the Hobbesian, Lockean, and Rousseauian obligations of the state like security, basic welfare, and the common good remain substantially unmet. Comparative analysis with Ghana's 1983–1999 structural adjustment programme reveals familiar patterns: macro-stabilisation achieved at the cost of social welfare, with distributional gains arriving years after the social damage. The paper concludes that without robust social protection accompanying fiscal reform, the Tinubu administration risks repeating not merely the failures of Nigeria's own 1986–1993 SAP era but a pattern endemic to externally pressured reform across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: social contract, Nigeria, Tinubu, structural adjustment, food inflation, poverty metrics, insecurity, macroeconomic reform, legitimacy, comparative governance

INTRODUCTION

On 29 May 2023, Bola Ahmed Tinubu was inaugurated as the 16th President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In his first speech, he made a declaration that would define and divide his early years in office: 'fuel subsidy is gone' (Tinubu, 2023). That single sentence unleashed a cascade of consequences. The naira lost more than half its official value within months. Petrol prices effectively tripled. Food prices reached levels that many Nigerian households had never seen in their lifetimes.

The administration's defence was consistent: these were painful but unavoidable reforms that previous governments had lacked the courage to implement. The numbers, officials insisted, were beginning to tell a different story of a recovering stock exchange, growing foreign reserves, and an improving fiscal position for state governments now that the federation account was no longer drained by a fuel subsidy that primarily benefited those who owned cars rather than those who owned nothing.

And yet something was off. The numbers celebrated in Abuja did not match what people were experiencing in Lagos markets, Kano eateries, or Imo villages. This gap between what aggregate data shows and what people feel is precisely where political philosophy becomes useful. Social contract theory, from its origins in the Enlightenment to its contemporary applications in development studies, offers a framework for asking: what do governments owe the people they govern, and are they delivering on that obligation?

This paper addresses these questions using qualitative description that embeds in it specific quantitative indicators throughout its analysis and also introduces a comparative framework drawing on Ghana and Nigeria's own SAP history thereby making its methodological commitments explicit from the onset.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Governance and the Social Contract in Africa

The question of what African governments owe their citizens has generated a rich body of scholarship. Mbembe (2001) argued that African postcolonial states frequently operate through a logic of 'commandement'. That is, the assertion of authority without corresponding accountability which helps explain why governments can invest in the appearance of governance without its substance. Mamdani (1996) traced how colonial-era structures bifurcated citizenship, creating formal rights that were systematically denied in practice. Both frameworks anticipate what the Tinubu administration has produced: a state that is winning a statistical argument while losing the welfare of its citizens.

More recent scholarship has focused specifically on the tension between economic reform and social welfare. Mkandawire and Soludo (1999) argued that IMF- and World Bank-inspired structural adjustment programmes across Africa in the 1980s achieved macro-stabilisation while destroying livelihoods which simply translates to 'adjustment without transformation.' Their analysis has lost none of its relevance: Nigeria's current reform programme mirrors that earlier period in design, though the social starting conditions are, if anything, worse than they were in 1986.

Nigeria's Reform History and the SAP Parallel

Nigeria's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of 1986–1993 under the Babangida administration is the most instructive historical comparison available. Adesina (2007) documented how SAP dismantled social safety nets, devalued wages, and produced what he called 'the structurally adjusted poor.' Between 1986 and 1992, GDP grew at an average of 5.4% annually (World Bank, 1993), a figure that resonates with official optimism today. Yet Nigerians experienced collapsed public hospitals, rising school dropout rates, and a deepening urban-rural divide. The aggregate improved; the distribution deteriorated.

Ghana's experience offers a parallel from a neighbouring economy. When Ghana implemented SAPs in 1983, GDP grew at approximately 5% annually, and inflation dropped from 75% in 1983 to 20% by 1985 (Graham, 1988, as cited in Michigan Journal of Economics, 2024). Proponents declared success. Yet ten years into adjustment, there was no evidence that regional inequalities had been addressed; approximately half of urban Ghanaians remained poor (Donkor, 2002). The Programme of Action to Mitigate the Social Cost of Adjustment (PAMSCAD), Ghana's equivalent of Nigeria's conditional cash transfer scheme, was subsequently described as 'a fraud perpetrated on the poor' (Donkor, 2002, p. 208). Nigeria's HOPE cash transfer programme, announced with similar intent in 2023, has suffered comparable problems of limited reach and elite capture.

Okonjo-Iweala (2012), writing about her own experience as Finance Minister, identified what she called the fundamental temporal mismatch of reform: its costs are immediate and visible while its benefits are delayed and abstract. This asymmetry shapes public perception and political legitimacy more profoundly than any communication strategy can offset.

The 'War of Narratives' in Political Economy

Modern governments increasingly manage economic narratives rather than simply deliver economic outcomes. Edelman (1988) described how governments use symbolic politics like statistics, ceremonies, and official language to project competence and maintain legitimacy even when tangible results are absent. Guriev and Treisman (2022) developed a related theory of 'spin governance' to portray leadership that maintains authority through information management. While Nigeria operates as a competitive democracy, the concept applies: when the Tinubu administration disputes World Bank poverty estimates as 'unrealistic' and requiring 'proper contextualisation' (Dare, 2025, as cited in Finance in Africa, 2025), it is engaged in exactly this kind of narrative contestation.

Odusola (2019) applied this lens specifically to Nigeria, arguing that successive administrations have deployed aggregate indicators (GDP growth, stock exchange performance) to obscure distributional failures, a practice he called 'statistical governance.' The current administration's communication strategy follows this pattern faithfully.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Social Contract Tradition

Social contract theory is a family of related arguments about the origins and limits of political authority. Three thinkers: Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau provide the theoretical architecture of this paper, and their differences are as instructive as their shared premises.

Thomas Hobbes (1651) argued that without government, human life in a state of nature is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.' To escape this condition, people surrender freedoms to a sovereign in exchange for security and order. For Hobbes, the primary obligation of government is physical protection. If the sovereign cannot provide security, the contract dissolves.

John Locke (1689) extended this framework. People surrender not all freedoms but only the right to self-adjudicate natural rights. In return, the government must protect life, liberty, and property. Crucially, Locke argued that if the government fails or acts tyrannically, the people retain the right to replace it, making Locke the ancestor of modern democratic accountability.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) took the argument in a more radical direction. For Rousseau, legitimate government must express the 'general will'. This refers to the common interest of the citizenry rather than the 'particular will' of powerful minorities. A government that serves elites at the expense of the general population is not, in Rousseauian terms, a legitimate government at all.

Operationalising the Framework: From Theory to Indicators

A key contribution of this paper is translating these theoretical constructs into measurable empirical dimensions. The three social contract obligations map onto three sets of indicators:

Table 1: Social Contract Dimensions and Empirical Indicators

Social Contract Obligation	Empirical Indicators Used
Hobbesian Security (physical protection)	Kidnapping incidence; conflict fatalities; internally displaced persons (IDPs); ACLED event counts
Lockean Welfare (life, liberty, basic needs)	Headline & food inflation; national poverty rate; urban poverty share; real wage trends
Rousseauian General Will (common good over elite interest)	Distribution of reform gains; coverage of social protection programmes; stock exchange vs. household consumption trends

This framework allows the analysis to move from philosophical assertion to evidenced evaluation, a methodological shift that distinguishes this paper from purely qualitative assessments.

METHODS

This paper employs an interpretive mixed-method design combining qualitative policy analysis with systematic use of secondary quantitative data. This design is consistent with what Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006) describe as interpretive policy research: a mode of inquiry that takes seriously both the meaning of policy texts and the material conditions they produce.

The primary analytical source is a documented assessment of the Tinubu administration's first three years that synthesises official statements, media commentary, and expert analysis. This document provides the interpretive material, including the claims, framing, and narrative strategies that this paper evaluates through social contract theory.

Quantitative data are drawn from four principal secondary sources: (1) the National Bureau of Statistics of Nigeria (NBS), specifically its Consumer Price Index reports and Labour Force Survey data; (2) the World Bank's Nigeria Economic Update series and its Africa's Pulse report; (3) the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project for security indicators; and (4) SBM Intelligence, a Lagos-based consultancy that tracks kidnapping and criminal violence. Where these sources converge, confidence in the finding is high. Where they diverge, as they do on the poverty rate, where NBS and World Bank methodologies differ, the paper acknowledges the disagreement explicitly.

Comparative analysis draws on published studies of Ghana's 1983–1999 SAP experience and Nigeria's own 1986–1993 adjustment programme. These cases were selected because of their structural similarity to the current reforms: subsidy removal, currency devaluation, fiscal centralisation, and externally aligned macroeconomic targets implemented at social cost. The comparison is not mechanical. For instance, Nigeria in 2023 differs from Ghana in 1983 in many important respects, including population size, oil dependence, and democratic context but the parallel is analytically productive.

A note on limitations: the quantitative data used here reflects national averages, which can obscure significant regional variation. Nigeria's 36 states have strikingly different inflation profiles (Bauchi recorded food inflation of 46.2% in November 2024 against Delta's 26.5% [NBS, 2024]), and security conditions in the Northeast differ fundamentally from those in the Southwest. The paper's national-level conclusions should therefore be understood as composite pictures rather than uniform descriptions.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: Macroeconomic Indicators Show Real but Concentrated Gains

The removal of the fuel subsidy freed up an estimated ₦4–6 trillion in annual government expenditure (Kalu, 2023), and state governments began receiving substantially increased federation account allocations. The Nigerian Stock Exchange All-Share Index gained significantly in nominal terms between mid-2023 and end-2024. Official exchange rate unification brought the parallel and official rates closer together and removed a long-standing distortion in the foreign exchange market.

These are genuine achievements. The fuel subsidy had been widely criticised as regressive, corruption-prone, and fiscally unsustainable. The IMF (2024) acknowledged that Tinubu's reforms 'have put the Nigerian economy in a better position to navigate this external environment.'

Yet the same IMF statement noted that 'poverty and food insecurity remain widespread' and that tangible benefits had not yet reached ordinary Nigerians (IMF, 2024, as cited in Peoples Gazette, 2025). The gains are real but they are concentrated in financial and fiscal sectors that most Nigerians do not directly access.

Finding 2: Food and Headline Inflation — The Numbers Behind 'Hardship'

The claim that ordinary Nigerians experienced severe hardship after May 2023 can now be stated with precision rather than assertion. The NBS data present the following trajectory:

Table 2: Nigeria Headline and Food Inflation Rate, Selected Months (NBS, 2024, 2025)

Month/Year	Headline Inflation (%)	Food Inflation (%)
May 2023 (Tinubu's inauguration)	22.4	24.8
December 2023	28.9	33.9
May 2024 (one year in office)	33.9	40.7
November 2024	34.6	39.9
December 2024	34.8	39.8
January 2025 (post-CPI rebase)	24.5	26.1

Note: The January 2025 drop reflects methodological rebasing of the CPI from a 2009 to a 2024 base year, not an actual price decline of that magnitude (NBS, 2025).

Several findings within this data are striking. First, the rate of food inflation grew by approximately 60.5% between May 2023 and December 2024, meaning the price of food was rising faster and faster during this period (Intelpoint, 2025). Second, the prices of staple foods consumed by the poor such as rice, yam, maize, and cassava rose fivefold between 2020 and 2024, compared to a threefold rise in general food prices (World Bank, as cited in Finance in Africa, 2025). Third, the apparent fall in January 2025 is largely a statistical artefact of CPI rebasing rather than actual price relief. Fourth, inter-state variation was severe: Bauchi State recorded food inflation of 46.2% in November 2024 while Delta recorded 26.5% (NBS, 2024), reflecting how unevenly the cost burden was distributed across the federation.

Finding 3: Poverty — From Descriptive Claims to Documented Numbers

The claim that poverty has deepened under the Tinubu administration can be anchored in specific data. The World Bank's December 2023 Nigeria Economic Update reported that the poverty rate rose from 40% in 2018 to 46% in 2023, adding an additional 24 million people below the national poverty line, which is more of a combined effect of sluggish pre-Tinubu growth and the immediate impact of the 2023 reforms (World Bank, 2023). By October 2024, the World Bank reported that the urban poverty share had nearly doubled, from 18% to 31.3%, as city dwellers faced both inflation and naira depreciation simultaneously (World Bank, 2024).

Two further data points are particularly significant. First, the World Bank's April 2025 Africa's Pulse report identified Nigeria as home to the world's highest number of extremely poor people, with approximately 106 million accounting for 19% of all extremely poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2025). Second, the share of ultra-poor Nigerians such as those unable to meet basic calorie needs even on their full income rose from 14% in 2019 to 27% in 2023, representing approximately 70 million people (Finance in Africa, 2025). These are not assertions of hardship. They are documented evidence of social contract failure.

On employment, the picture requires careful interpretation. The NBS Labour Force Survey (Q1 2023) reported an official unemployment rate of 4.1%, a dramatic reduction from the 33.3% recorded in Q4 2020. However, as the World Bank (2024) notes, this improvement reflects a change in measurement definition under the new ILO-aligned methodology, anyone who worked one hour for pay in the past seven days is classified as 'employed.' Only 11.8% of employed Nigerians held formal wage jobs in Q1 2023; 12.2% were underemployed (World Bank, 2024). These figures suggest a labour market characterised by survival-level informal work rather than productive employment.

Finding 4: Security — Quantifying the Hobbesian Deficit

The Hobbesian dimension of the social contract is the most basic: if a government cannot protect its citizens, the foundational obligation is unmet. The security data for the Tinubu administration's first three years demonstrate that this obligation is only partially fulfilled.

Table 3: Selected Nigeria Security Indicators, 2023–2025

Indicator	Data
Kidnapping victims, 2023	1,878 (Nextier, as cited in EUAA, 2025)
Kidnapping victims, 2024	2,452 — a 31% year-on-year increase (Nextier, as cited in EUAA, 2025)
Persons abducted Jul 2024 – Jun 2025	Nearly 5,000 (SBM Intelligence, 2025)
Deaths from banditry, 2023	892 (Nigeria Watch, as cited in EUAA, 2025)
Deaths from banditry, 2024	1,452 — a 63% year-on-year increase (Nigeria Watch, as cited in EUAA, 2025)
Ransoms paid Jul 2024 – Jun 2025	At least ₦2.57 billion paid; ₦48 billion total demanded (SBM Intelligence, 2025)
Nigeria's share of W. Africa abductions (2019–2023)	58% (ACLED, 2024)

The government's security response has produced some documented results. The Defence Headquarters reported that in 2024, security forces neutralised over 3,100 terrorists, arrested 2,500 suspects, and freed over 1,600 kidnapping victims (ONSA, as cited in Modern Ghana, 2025). The Multi-Agency Anti-Kidnap Fusion Cell, established in late 2024 in partnership with the UK's National Crime Agency, reported an 80% success rate in operations. These are not trivial achievements.

However, the security gains are fragile and contested. The raw kidnapping and banditry statistics continued to worsen through 2024, even as the government announced military successes. As SBM Intelligence's mid-2025 data makes clear, the kidnapping economy remains large, violent, and geographically dispersed. The state's security response remains primarily military rather than structural, leaving unaddressed the agricultural displacement, youth unemployment, and land-use conflicts that sustain armed groups across the Northwest and Middle Belt.

Finding 5: The 2027 Electoral Landscape

The source document's analysis of 2027 electoral dynamics is itself revealing about the state of democratic accountability. It describes an opposition that is fractured, with the Labour Party, People's Democratic Party, and smaller formations unable to consolidate. There is also a voting pattern increasingly shaped by ethnic and regional loyalty rather than policy performance. This matters for social contract theory because it speaks directly to whether the accountability mechanism of democratic elections is functioning.

The World Bank noted in October 2025 that a modest poverty reduction is forecast by 2027, from 62% to 61%. This appears to be the first predicted reversal in nearly a decade timed precisely with the general elections (Finance in Africa, 2025). Whether this narrow improvement translates into political legitimacy will depend on whether it reaches the ultra-poor or merely statistical averages.

DISCUSSION

The Distributional Problem: Particular Will vs. General Will

The central Rousseauian critique of the Tinubu administration is not that reform is wrong but that its gains and costs are distributed asymmetrically. The gains, which involve a more competitive exchange rate, stronger stock market performance, improved FAAC allocations accrue primarily to investors, importers, formal sector businesses, and state government coffers. But the costs, such as tripled petrol prices, collapsed purchasing power, food inflation above 40% are borne disproportionately by the poor, the informal sector, and rural households who spend the largest share of their income on food.

This distributional asymmetry is not accidental. It is the structural outcome of reform programmes designed primarily to satisfy macroeconomic creditors. Easterly (2001) showed that across 36 countries that received ten or more IMF and World Bank adjustment loans between 1980 and 1998, the median growth rate of income per person was zero indicating that the aggregate improved while distribution stagnated. Nigeria is walking a well-worn path.

Comparing Adjustment Outcomes: Ghana, Nigeria's SAP, and the Present

The comparative analysis offers the most sober perspective available. Ghana's SAP from 1983 is often cited by reform advocates as a success story: GDP grew at 5% annually, inflation fell sharply, and the economy stabilised. Yet a decade after implementation, roughly half of urban Ghanaians remained poor, regional inequalities had not been addressed, and the social mitigation programme (PAMSCAD) had largely failed (Donkor, 2002). The aggregate macroeconomic story and the human story diverged precisely, as they are diverging in Nigeria today.

Nigeria's own 1986–1993 SAP experience followed a similar curve. GDP growth averaged 5.4% annually between 1986 and 1992 (World Bank, 1993), yet Adesina (2007) documented the collapse of public health services, the rise of school dropout rates, and the creation of a generation of 'structurally adjusted poor', implying workers whose formal sector wages became meaningless in real terms. The current reform era differs in that it has democratic legitimacy and was undertaken without IMF conditionality. But it shares the structural feature that defines adjustment failure: macroeconomic gains that do not reach the people bearing the reform's costs.

The Narrative War and the Poverty Data Dispute

Perhaps the most striking moment in the narrative war was the Tinubu administration's formal response to the World Bank's poverty estimates. When the World Bank's Africa's Pulse report (April 2025) identified Nigeria as having the world's largest population of extremely poor people, the Presidency through Special Adviser Sunday Dare described the statistics as 'unrealistic' and called for them to be 'properly contextualised' (Finance in Africa, 2025). This is a textbook example of Edelman's (1988) symbolic politics: the substitution of narrative contestation for policy response.

The dispute does contain a genuinely technical dimension. The NBS rebasing of the CPI in January 2025 and methodological differences between the NBS poverty line and the World Bank's $2.15-per-day threshold mean that different numbers will produce different results. Acknowledging this complexity is intellectually honest. But dismissing the findings entirely without offering alternative data is not a methodological correction; it is political deflection. The ultra-poverty data (27% of Nigerians unable to meet basic calorie needs on full income) is robust across methodologies.

The Social Protection Gap: The Missing Piece of the Contract

Social contract theory does not demand that governments never impose economic hardship. Locke acknowledged that governance sometimes requires choices that hurt some citizens. What the contract demands is that such choices be accompanied by meaningful protection for the most vulnerable. By this measure, the Tinubu administration has a significant gap to close.

Nigeria's social protection expenditure stands at 0.14% of GDP, far below the global average of 1.5% and the African average of approximately 1.2% (World Bank, 2025). Social protection programme coverage has fallen from nearly 20% of the population in 2018–19 to just 6% in 2023, following the suspension of key programmes during the COVID-19 period (World Bank, 2025). The government's HOPE cash transfer programme was announced as a direct mitigation of subsidy removal, but its implementation has been slow and its reach limited. The World Bank has estimated that providing monthly transfers to all ultra-poor households in 2024 would consume only 19% of total FAAC deductions indicating that the fiscal capacity exists but the political will and administrative infrastructure have not matched it (World Bank, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Three years into the Tinubu administration, this paper's empirically grounded assessment produces a finding that is uncomfortable but clear. The social contract between the Nigerian state and its citizens is under serious strain. On the Hobbesian dimension, kidnapping incidents rose 31% in 2024, banditry deaths increased 63%, and Nigeria accounts for 58% of all West African abductions. These indicate conditions that represent a fundamental failure of the state's protective function. On the Lockean dimension, food inflation peaked above 39%, the poverty rate has risen to 46–62% depending on the methodology used, and an estimated 70 million Nigerians cannot afford to meet basic calorie needs even on their full income. On the Rousseauian dimension, the gains of reform have concentrated in financial markets and state treasuries while the costs have been diffused across the population's most vulnerable members.

The comparative analysis reinforces this assessment. Ghana's macroeconomic success story under SAP did not prevent half its urban population from remaining poor a decade later. Nigeria's own 1986–1993 SAP achieved GDP growth while generating a generation of structurally adjusted poor. The current administration appears to be replicating the structure, macroeconomic targets met and distributional outcomes neglected rather than learning from the pattern.

This is not a finding that forecloses the possibility of recovery. The reforms may yet produce the productive investment, employment, and fiscal capacity that their architects promise. The World Bank's modest forecast of poverty beginning to decline in 2027 suggests that the macroeconomic logic is not entirely wrong, only dangerously incomplete without stronger social protection. A government that expanded HOPE cash transfer coverage from 6% to even 15% of the population, that channelled increased FAAC revenues into measurable public health and education outcomes, and that treated security as a governance challenge rather than primarily a military one would be a government more clearly honouring its contractual obligations.Until those gaps are closed, the data tells a clear story: the Nigerian state is winning its statistical arguments while losing the people it is supposed to be governing.

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