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Reconceptualizing Governance in Nigeria: A Dialectical Analysis of Reform Contradictions and Adaptive Governance under the Bola Ahmed Tinubu Administration

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ABSTRACT

Governance reforms in developing countries frequently generate tensions between policy objectives and implementation realities, particularly where institutional constraints shape reform outcomes. This study examines these governance contradictions through a dialectical analysis of reform implementation under the Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration in Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative documentary case study design, drawing on official government publications, reports from international institutions, and peer-reviewed literature to analyse governance reforms and their implications. Guided by the dialectical framework of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the study identifies the interaction between governance ideals, reform-induced socioeconomic challenges, and institutional adaptation. The analysis indicates that while reforms such as fuel subsidy removal and exchange-rate liberalisation were intended to improve fiscal sustainability and macroeconomic stability, their implementation has also been associated with inflationary pressures, increased living costs, and institutional implementation challenges documented in the reviewed sources. Rather than viewing these outcomes as policy failure alone, the study argues that they reflect deeper structural contradictions within Nigeria's governance system. To address these challenges, the paper proposes an Adaptive Hybrid Governance Model (AHGM) that integrates administrative capacity, institutional accountability, adaptive policymaking, and citizen engagement as complementary mechanisms for improving governance effectiveness. The study contributes to governance scholarship by demonstrating how dialectical analysis can provide a framework for understanding reform contradictions and informing context-sensitive governance reforms in Nigeria and similar developing states.

Keywords: Dialectical governance, Public administration, Governance reform, Adaptive hybrid, Administrative capacity

INTRODUCTION

Governance in Nigeria has long been characterized by a persistent tension between administrative ideals and practical realities. Since independence, the Nigerian state has adopted institutional frameworks grounded in bureaucratic rationality, rule-based administration, and developmental aspirations. These ideals, largely influenced by classical administrative theories such as those of Max Weber, envisioned a governance system capable of delivering efficiency, accountability, and socio-economic development. However, the lived experience of governance in Nigeria reveals a more complex and contradictory trajectory, marked by institutional fragility, corruption, policy inconsistency, and political patronage.

Nigeria's governance challenges long predate the current administration and are rooted in enduring issues of institutional capacity, public-sector accountability, policy inconsistency, and administrative effectiveness. However, the inauguration of the Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration in May 2023 marked a significant phase in Nigeria's governance trajectory through the introduction of major economic and administrative reforms, including the removal of fuel subsidies and exchange-rate liberalisation. While these reforms reflect elements of rational-economic governance and align with global best practices, their implementation has generated significant socio-economic tensions, including inflationary pressures, public dissatisfaction, and widening inequality. This duality makes the Tinubu administration an ideal case for dialectical analysis. Accordingly, this study treats the Tinubu administration not as the origin of Nigeria's governance challenges but as a contemporary case through which longstanding governance contradictions can be examined.

The core problem this study addresses is the widening gap between the theoretical foundations of public administration and the empirical realities of governance in Nigeria. Despite decades of reforms and policy interventions, governance outcomes continue to fall short of expectations, suggesting that existing frameworks may be insufficient for capturing the dynamic and conflict-driven nature of state administration in the Nigerian context.

Against this background, the study examines governance reforms under the Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration through a qualitative documentary case study informed by dialectical analysis. Specifically, it seeks to explain how reform contradictions emerge, how they reflect broader institutional dynamics within Nigeria's governance system, and how these contradictions can inform the development of an Adaptive Hybrid Governance Model for improving governance effectiveness by examining the contradictions between policy intentions and outcomes.

This study is significant in both theoretical and practical terms. Theoretically, it extends the application of dialectical analysis within public administration scholarship, offering a more dynamic lens for understanding governance systems. Practically, it provides policy-relevant insights into how Nigeria can move toward a more adaptive, resilient, and context-sensitive governance model capable of reconciling competing institutional demands.

Theoretical Framework: Dialectical Analysis

This study is anchored in the dialectical tradition, a philosophical framework most prominently developed by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and later reinterpreted in materialist terms by Karl Marx. Dialectics provides a dynamic lens for understanding social systems, emphasizing contradiction, conflict, and transformation as central drivers of change (Hegel, 1977; Marx, 1867/1990). Unlike linear models of governance analysis, dialectical reasoning assumes that institutional realities evolve through tensions between opposing forces, which are eventually resolved into new forms.

In Hegelian philosophy, development unfolds through a triadic process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, where each stage reflects both continuity and rupture (Hegel, 1977). Marx extends this logic by grounding it in material conditions, arguing that contradictions within political and economic structures, particularly those linked to power, class, and resource distribution, drive historical transformation (Marx, 1867/1990; Harvey, 2010). This reinterpretation makes dialectics particularly useful for analyzing governance systems in developing states, where institutional contradictions are often deeply embedded.

Applied to public administration, dialectical analysis enables a critical understanding of the gap between administrative ideals and governance outcomes. Classical administrative theory, especially the work of Max Weber, emphasizes legal-rational authority, bureaucratic hierarchy, and merit-based systems as the foundation of effective governance (Weber, 1978). However, contemporary scholarship shows that these ideals often clash with political realities, particularly in post-colonial states where informal institutions and patronage networks shape administrative behaviour (Olowu, 2023; Adebayo, 2022).

Within the Nigerian context, this contradiction is especially pronounced. While formal governance structures reflect Weberian ideals, empirical evidence consistently points to challenges such as corruption, weak institutional capacity, and policy inconsistency (Transparency International, 2024; World Bank, 2023). These conditions represent the antithesis to the theoretical foundations of governance, highlighting the limitations of applying universal administrative models without contextual adaptation.

The administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu provides a contemporary case through which these dialectical tensions can be examined. The government's reform agenda, including fuel subsidy removal, exchange rate unification, and fiscal restructuring reflects a commitment to rational-economic governance aligned with global policy prescriptions (World Bank, 2023). These reforms embody the thesis, emphasizing efficiency, market discipline, and institutional rationality.

However, the implementation of these policies has generated significant socio-economic contradictions. Rising inflation, increased cost of living, and public resistance highlight the tension between policy intentions and lived realities (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; IMF, 2023). These outcomes represent the antithesis, exposing structural weaknesses such as inadequate social protection systems, limited administrative capacity, and uneven policy execution.

Dialectical analysis thus allows this study to conceptualize governance under the Tinubu administration not simply as policy success or failure, but as an evolving process shaped by competing institutional logics and socio-economic pressures. It shifts the analytical focus toward understanding how contradictions emerge and how they might be resolved.

Ultimately, this framework provides the foundation for identifying a possible synthesis, a governance model that integrates efficiency with equity, reform with inclusion, and institutional order with democratic responsiveness. Such a model would move beyond rigid theoretical prescriptions and instead reflect the complex realities of governance in Nigeria.

Thesis: Ideal Governance and Administrative Order

The thesis component of dialectical analysis represents the foundational ideals upon which systems of governance are constructed. In the context of public administration, this thesis is rooted in the principles of rationality, efficiency, accountability, and institutional order. These ideals are most clearly articulated in the classical bureaucratic model developed by Max Weber, whose theory of legal-rational authority remains central to modern administrative thought (Weber, 1978).

Weber conceptualized bureaucracy as an organizational system characterized by clearly defined hierarchies, rule-based decision-making, meritocratic recruitment, and impersonality in the application of laws. Such a system, he argued, provides predictability, stability, and efficiency in governance. In this ideal form, public institutions operate independently of personal interests, ensuring that policy implementation is guided by formal procedures rather than political or social pressures (Weber, 1978; Olsen, 2006).

Beyond Weberian bureaucracy, the thesis of ideal governance is further reinforced by developmental state theory, which emphasizes the role of a capable and interventionist state in driving economic growth and structural transformation (Evans, 1995). This perspective highlights the importance of strong institutions, policy coherence, and strategic state planning in achieving national development objectives. Similarly, the principles of New Public Management (NPM) introduce efficiency-oriented reforms, advocating for performance measurement, fiscal discipline, and market-based mechanisms within the public sector (Hood, 1991; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

In the Nigerian context, these theoretical ideals have historically shaped the design of governance structures. At independence, Nigeria inherited a bureaucratic system modeled after the British administrative tradition, with an emphasis on civil service professionalism, hierarchical organization, and rule-based governance (Adebayo, 2022). Over time, successive governments have introduced reforms aimed at strengthening institutional capacity, improving service delivery, and aligning governance practices with global standards (Olowu, 2023).

The administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu can be interpreted, at least in principle, as an attempt to reassert these ideals of rational and efficient governance. Key policy initiatives, such as the removal of fuel subsidies, exchange rate unification, and efforts toward fiscal consolidation reflect a commitment to economic rationalization and institutional discipline. These reforms align with the logic of both developmental state theory and neoliberal policy frameworks, which prioritize efficiency, market stability, and long-term economic sustainability (World Bank, 2023; IMF, 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, the removal of fuel subsidies, for example, can be understood as an effort to eliminate market distortions and improve fiscal efficiency. Similarly, exchange rate unification seeks to enhance transparency and reduce arbitrage opportunities within the foreign exchange system. These policies embody the principles of rational-economic governance, where decisions are guided by technical expertise and macroeconomic logic rather than political expediency.

Furthermore, the emphasis on revenue generation, digitalization of government processes, and institutional reforms under the Tinubu administration reflects elements of New Public Management and contemporary governance models that prioritize efficiency, accountability, and innovation (Olowu, 2023). In this sense, the administration's policy direction represents a continuation of the longstanding aspiration to build a modern, capable, and development-oriented state.

However, it is important to note that the thesis, by its nature, represents an idealized condition. It assumes the existence of strong institutions, effective implementation mechanisms, and a socio-political environment conducive to reform. In practice, these conditions are rarely fully realized, particularly in complex governance systems such as Nigeria's.

Thus, while the Tinubu administration's reforms align with the theoretical foundations of ideal governance, they also set the stage for the emergence of contradictions. These contradictions, which arise from the interaction between policy ideals and socio-economic realities, form the basis of the antithesis explored in the next section.

Antithesis: Crisis of Governance in Nigeria

The antithesis in dialectical analysis represents the contradiction or negation of the established order. In the context of governance in Nigeria, this antithesis manifests as the persistent gap between the ideals of rational, efficient administration and the realities of institutional weakness, socio-economic instability, and policy-induced hardship. While the thesis emphasizes order, efficiency, and development, the antithesis reveals the structural and systemic challenges that undermine these aspirations.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that governance in Nigeria is characterized by deep-rooted institutional deficiencies, including corruption, weak regulatory enforcement, and policy inconsistency (Transparency International, 2024; World Bank, 2023). Nigeria's ranking in global governance and corruption indices continues to reflect these challenges, indicating that formal institutional frameworks often coexist with informal systems of patronage and rent-seeking behaviour. These conditions not only distort policy implementation but also erode public trust in government institutions.

Under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, these contradictions have become particularly visible. While the government's reform agenda aligns with principles of economic rationality, its implementation has generated significant socio-economic tensions. One of the most notable examples is the removal of fuel subsidies in 2023. Although widely supported by international financial institutions as a necessary fiscal reform, the immediate consequence was a sharp increase in fuel prices, which triggered a broader rise in transportation costs and inflation across the economy (IMF, 2023).

Data from the National Bureau of Statistics indicate that inflation rates surged significantly following the implementation of these reforms, with food inflation disproportionately affecting low-income households (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). This has contributed to a decline in real incomes and an increase in poverty levels, exacerbating existing socio-economic inequalities. In effect, a policy designed to promote long-term efficiency has produced short-term hardship, highlighting the tension between economic rationality and social welfare.

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Similarly, the unification of exchange rates, intended to improve transparency and attract foreign investment, has led to currency depreciation and increased import costs. Given Nigeria's heavy reliance on imported goods, this has further intensified inflationary pressures and reduced purchasing power (World Bank, 2023). These outcomes illustrate a fundamental contradiction: policies that are theoretically sound within a neoliberal framework may generate adverse effects when implemented in a structurally fragile economy.

Beyond economic indicators, the antithesis is also reflected in the institutional capacity of the Nigerian state. Effective policy implementation requires strong administrative systems, reliable data, and coordinated governance structures. However, persistent challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiency, limited technical capacity, and political interference continue to undermine the effectiveness of reforms (Olowu, 2023; Adebayo, 2022). As a result, even well-designed policies often fail to achieve their intended outcomes.

Public response to these reforms further underscores the dialectical tension. Widespread dissatisfaction, protests, and growing skepticism toward government policies indicate a disconnect between policy formulation and citizen experience. This aligns with broader critiques in governance literature, which emphasize the importance of legitimacy, inclusiveness, and social protection in sustaining reform processes (Stiglitz, 2019).

Moreover, the absence or inadequacy of compensatory social measures, such as targeted subsidies, cash transfers, or effective welfare programs has intensified the negative impact of reforms on vulnerable populations. This reflects a critical weakness in the governance framework: the failure to balance efficiency-driven policies with social equity considerations.

From a dialectical perspective, these contradictions are not merely unintended consequences but are indicative of deeper structural tensions within the Nigerian state. They reveal the limits of transplanting universal policy models into a context marked by institutional fragility, socio-economic inequality, and political complexity. The antithesis thus represents not just a breakdown of governance, but a necessary stage in the evolution of the system, i.e one that exposes underlying weaknesses and creates the conditions for transformation.

In this sense, the governance challenges observed under the Tinubu administration should not be interpreted solely as policy failures, but as manifestations of unresolved contradictions between competing institutional logics: efficiency versus equity, reform versus stability, and global economic prescriptions versus local realities.

Synthesis: Toward Adaptive and Hybrid Governance

The synthesis represents the resolution of contradictions identified between the thesis (ideal governance) and the antithesis (practical realities). Within the Nigerian context, and particularly under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the synthesis cannot simply involve a return to theoretical ideals or a rejection of reform policies. Rather, it requires the development of a context-sensitive governance model that integrates efficiency with social equity, institutional rationality with political realities, and global best practices with local conditions.

Table I: Adaptive Hybrid Governance Model (AHGM)

Governance contradiction	**Governance response**	**Institutional mechanisms**	**Expected outcome**	**Potential challenge**
Limited transparency	Digital governance	E-governance, open budgeting, digital expenditure, monitoring	Improved accountability	ICT infrastructure and digital literacy
Weak citizen participation	Participatory governance	Stakeholders consultations, public forum, feedback platforms,	Greater legitimacy and trust	Political resistance

Weak institutional capacity	Institutional strengthening	Merit-based recruitment, capacity building, policy coordination	Improved implementation	Resource capacity constraint
Efficiency-equity, trade-off	Integrated reform strategy	Social protection, targeted subsidies, phased implementation	Inclusive and sustainable reforms	Fiscal pressures

This study proposes an **Adaptive Hybrid Governance Model (AHGM)** as a synthesis framework for addressing the structural contradictions in Nigeria's public administration system. The model is built on three interconnected pillars: **digital governance, participatory governance, and institutional strengthening**, drawing from classical bureaucracy, New Public Management (NPM), and contemporary governance network theories (Osborne, 2010; Dunleavy et al., 2006).

1. Digital Governance: Enhancing Transparency and Efficiency

Digital governance represents a critical pathway for reconciling the tension between efficiency and accountability. By leveraging information and communication technologies, governments can reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, limit opportunities for corruption, and improve service delivery (Dunleavy et al., 2006).

In the context of the Tinubu administration, ongoing efforts toward digitalization, such as electronic revenue collection systems, digital identity integration, and financial tracking platforms offer a foundation for strengthening institutional transparency. Expanding these initiatives to include open budgeting systems, real-time expenditure tracking, and public access to government data can significantly enhance accountability.

Moreover, digital tools can mitigate some of the adverse effects of economic reforms. For instance, targeted digital cash transfer systems can be used to support vulnerable populations affected by subsidy removal, ensuring that efficiency-driven policies are complemented by social protection mechanisms.

2. Participatory Governance: Bridging the State-Citizen Gap

One of the central contradictions identified in the antithesis is the disconnect between policy formulation and citizen experience. Participatory governance addresses this gap by incorporating citizens into decision-making processes, thereby enhancing legitimacy and policy acceptance (Fung, 2015).

In Nigeria, governance has historically been top-down, with limited mechanisms for meaningful citizen engagement. Under the Tinubu administration, the absence of widespread consultation prior to major economic reforms contributed to public dissatisfaction and resistance. A shift toward participatory governance would involve institutionalizing stakeholder consultations, public deliberation forums, and feedback mechanisms within policy processes.

Such an approach not only improves the quality of decision-making but also fosters trust between the government and citizens. It ensures that reforms are not only technically sound but also socially responsive, reducing the likelihood of conflict and policy reversal.

3. Institutional Strengthening: Building State Capacity

At the core of Nigeria's governance challenges is the issue of weak institutional capacity. Without strong institutions, even well-designed policies are unlikely to succeed. Institutional strengthening, therefore, forms a central component of the proposed synthesis.

This involves improving bureaucratic professionalism, enhancing policy coordination, and reducing political interference in administrative processes (Olowu, 2023). Merit-based recruitment, continuous training, and performance evaluation systems are essential for building a capable civil service aligned with Weberian principles (Weber, 1978).

Under the Tinubu administration, institutional reforms must go beyond policy announcements to focus on implementation capacity. Strengthening agencies responsible for economic management, social protection, and regulatory enforcement is critical for ensuring that reforms achieve their intended outcomes.

4. Integrating Efficiency and Equity: A Balanced Reform Approach

A key contribution of this study is the argument that governance reforms must simultaneously address efficiency and equity. The Tinubu administration's policies have largely emphasized economic efficiency, often at the expense of short-term social welfare. While such an approach may be justified within a neoliberal framework, it risks undermining social stability and political legitimacy.

The proposed hybrid model advocates for a **sequenced reform strategy**, where efficiency-driven policies are implemented alongside robust social protection measures. For example, fuel subsidy removal should be complemented by targeted transportation subsidies, food security programs, and income support for vulnerable groups. This dual approach ensures that reforms are both economically sustainable and socially inclusive (Stiglitz, 2019).

5. Toward a Context-Sensitive Governance Model

The synthesis ultimately calls for a shift from rigid, one-size-fits-all governance models to adaptive frameworks that reflect Nigeria's unique socio-political and economic context. This aligns with contemporary governance literature, which emphasizes flexibility, collaboration, and context-awareness as key elements of effective public administration (Osborne, 2010).

The Adaptive Hybrid Governance Model recognizes that contradictions are inherent in governance systems. Rather than attempting to eliminate these contradictions, it seeks to manage and reconcile them through continuous learning, institutional adaptation, and policy innovation.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this synthesis extends dialectical analysis within public administration by demonstrating how contradictions can be systematically addressed through integrated governance models. It moves beyond critique to offer a constructive framework for reform.

Practically, the model provides actionable insights for policymakers under the Tinubu administration and beyond. It highlights the importance of aligning reform strategies with institutional capacity, social realities, and citizen expectations. By doing so, it offers a pathway toward more sustainable and inclusive governance in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative documentary case study design to examine governance reforms in Nigeria through the contemporary experience of the Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration. A qualitative documentary approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret governance reforms using existing documentary evidence rather than generating primary data. Documentary analysis enables the systematic examination and interpretation of official records, policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly literature to develop empirical understanding of complex social and political phenomena.

The study is situated within an embedded case study framework in which Nigeria represents the broader governance context, while the Tinubu administration serves as the contemporary case through which governance contradictions and adaptive governance responses are examined. Documentary evidence was purposively selected from authoritative and publicly accessible sources. The principal sources included official publications of the Federal Government of Nigeria, reports of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Transparency International, together with peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books on governance, public administration, institutional reform, and dialectical theory. The documentary review focused primarily on materials published between 2023 and 2025, corresponding to the period of governance reforms under the Tinubu administration, while foundational theoretical works were included irrespective of publication date.

Documents were included where they (i) examined governance reforms or public administration in Nigeria, (ii) contained empirical evidence relating to institutional performance, macroeconomic reforms, or governance outcomes, (iii) originated from recognised governmental institutions, international organisations, or peer-reviewed academic publishers, and (iv) were directly relevant to the objectives of the study. Newspaper opinion articles, blogs, social media posts, and publications without identifiable institutional or scholarly credibility were excluded from the analysis.

Data were analysed using a dialectical documentary analysis guided by the thesis–antithesis–synthesis framework. The analytical procedure involved four stages. First, all selected documents were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with their content. Second, relevant information relating to governance ideals, reform implementation, institutional constraints, and policy outcomes was identified through thematic coding. Third, these themes were organised into dialectical categories representing the governance thesis (normative governance ideals), antithesis (institutional and policy contradictions), and synthesis (adaptive governance responses). Finally, the relationships among these categories were interpreted to develop the proposed Adaptive Hybrid Governance Model (AHGM).

To enhance the credibility of the findings, documentary triangulation was employed by comparing evidence across government publications, international institutional reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature. This process reduced reliance on a single source of evidence and strengthened the consistency of the interpretations. Although the study does not utilise primary data, the use of multiple authoritative documentary sources, combined with a transparent analytical procedure, provides a robust basis for examining governance reforms and institutional adaptation in contemporary Nigeria.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are structured along the dialectical triad, revealing the dynamic interplay between governance ideals, practical contradictions, and reform possibilities.

1. Breakdown of the Thesis

The analysis shows that while Nigeria's governance system is formally grounded in Weberian principles of bureaucracy and rational administration, these ideals are only partially realized in practice. Under the Tinubu administration, policy initiatives such as subsidy removal and exchange rate unification reflect a strong alignment with economic rationality and global reform frameworks. However, the effectiveness of these policies is constrained by institutional limitations and socio-economic conditions.

2. Emergence of the Antithesis

Documentary evidence reviewed in this study indicates that the implementation of key economic reforms under the Tinubu administration coincided with rising inflationary pressures, increased living costs, and heightened public concern regarding household welfare. For example, National Bureau of Statistics (2024) Consumer Price Index reports documented sustained increases in headline inflation during the reform period, while the World Bank's Nigeria Development Update (2023) observed that inflation continued to erode household purchasing power, particularly among low-income households. These findings suggest a governance contradiction between macroeconomic efficiency objectives and short-term social welfare outcomes.These contradictions are further reinforced in documentary evidence reviewed that institutional constraints continue to affect the implementation of governance reforms. The IMF's 2024 Article IV Consultation Report highlights challenges in public financial management, revenue mobilisation, and the effectiveness of social protection systems. Similarly, the World Bank's Nigeria Development Update identifies implementation bottlenecks and institutional capacity limitations affecting reform outcomes. These findings reinforce the conclusion that governance challenges in Nigeria are not merely the result of policy design but are also rooted in structural and institutional constraints.

3. Pathways to Synthesis

The study identifies the need for a governance approach that integrates efficiency with equity and reform with inclusion. The proposed Adaptive Hybrid Governance Model (AHGM) provides a framework for achieving this balance by combining digital governance, participatory governance, and institutional strengthening.

The findings indicate that resolving governance contradictions requires more than policy adjustments; it demands a fundamental shift toward adaptive and context-sensitive governance structures. This includes strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing citizen engagement, and ensuring that economic reforms are supported by social protection measures.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that governance in Nigeria is characterised by enduring institutional contradictions that predate the current administration. Using the Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration as an embedded contemporary case, the analysis shows how these longstanding governance tensions continue to shape the implementation and outcomes of recent reform policies.

The dialectical framework provides a valuable lens for understanding these dynamics, emphasizing that contradictions are not anomalies but essential drivers of institutional evolution. The study argues that effective governance in Nigeria requires not the elimination of these contradictions, but their strategic management through adaptive and integrative approaches.

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