

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EVOLUTION OF NIGERIAN LEGISLATURE: 1914 TO PRESENT DAY

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ABSTRACT: Development from pre-colonial indigenous governance systems through colonial institutional structures, post-independence parliamentary democracy, military rule, and the contemporary presidential system under the 1999 Constitution. It argues that while legislative institutions in Nigeria have undergone significant constitutional transformation, their practical effectiveness has been consistently constrained by enduring structural factors including colonial executive dominance, limited representation in early legislative councils, ethnic and regional fragmentation in the First Republic, and prolonged disruption under military rule. The study further analyses the post-1999 legislature, highlighting its constitutionally entrenched powers, judicial reinforcement of legislative authority, and the institutional role of committees in modern governance. Despite these formal advancements, the legislature continues to face challenges relating to executive influence, weak oversight capacity, and political party dominance. The paper concludes that Nigeria's legislature reflects a historical continuity of institutional weakness, best conceptualised as a "lame giant", formally empowered but practically constrained. It recommends structural

reforms aimed at strengthening legislative independence, enhancing oversight mechanisms, and consolidating democratic accountability in order to bridge the gap between constitutional design and legislative performance.

Keywords: *Nigerian legislature; history and evolution; constitutional development; legislative effectiveness*

Introduction

The legislature is one of the most fundamental institutions in a democratic system because it serves as the organ of government responsible for law-making, representation, accountability, and oversight of public administration. In democratic societies, the legislature functions as the institutional voice of the people by translating public interests and societal demands into laws and policies that regulate the state. Legislative institutions are indispensable to constitutional democracy because they provide the legal and institutional framework through which governmental powers are exercised and controlled. It has been contended that effective legislative institutions are essential for democratic consolidation, accountability, and the promotion of good governance in developing states such as Nigeria. The legislature therefore performs critical functions including law-making, representation of constituencies, approval of budgets and public expenditure, oversight of executive activities, and constitutional amendment. Through these responsibilities, legislatures ensure checks and balances within government and help to prevent executive abuse of power.

In Nigeria, the legislature occupies a central position within the constitutional structure established under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended). The National Assembly, comprising the Senate and the House of Representatives, exercises legislative authority at the federal level, while state Houses of Assembly perform similar functions within the states. Legislative committees have become important instruments for strengthening parliamentary effectiveness through detailed scrutiny of bills, investigations, and oversight of government agencies. The Nigerian legislature has increasingly become a major institution for democratic accountability since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999. Apart from law-making, the legislature represents the interests of citizens across different constituencies and supervises the implementation of public policies through

investigative hearings, budgetary control, and confirmation powers. These functions make the legislature an indispensable institution for democratic governance and political development in Nigeria.

The historical development of the legislature in Nigeria dates back to the colonial period when the British colonial administration introduced legislative institutions primarily for administrative convenience and imperial control. The Lagos Legislative Council established in 1862 marked the beginning of legislative development in Nigeria, although its structure and composition largely excluded indigenous participation. Colonial legislative institutions in Nigeria were initially designed to advance British colonial interests rather than democratic representation. Nevertheless, constitutional developments such as the Clifford Constitution of 1922, Richards Constitution of 1946, Macpherson Constitution of 1951, and Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 gradually expanded Nigerian participation in legislative governance. These constitutional reforms laid the foundation for representative government and the emergence of modern parliamentary institutions in Nigeria. Following independence in 1960, Nigeria experienced both parliamentary and presidential legislative systems, although prolonged military rule between 1966 and 1999 significantly disrupted legislative growth and democratic governance. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the Nigerian legislature has continued to evolve as a vital institution for constitutionalism, accountability, and democratic consolidation. This paper therefore examines the evolution, functions, and significance of the legislature in Nigeria's political development.

Conceptual Clarification: Meaning and Functions of Legislature

Meaning of Legislature

The legislature is a central institution in every democratic system and constitutes one of the three principal arms of government alongside the executive and judiciary. It is primarily responsible for making laws and ensuring that governmental powers are exercised in accordance with constitutional principles. The legislature refers to a representative body established by the constitution to enact laws, deliberate on public policies, and protect the interests of citizens within the political system. Similarly, it has been defined as an institutional mechanism through which citizens participate in governance through elected representatives. As an institution of governance, the legislature promotes accountability,

constitutionalism, and democratic participation by serving as a bridge between the government and the people. In Nigeria, legislative powers are vested in the National Assembly at the federal level and the Houses of Assembly at the state level under the 1999 Constitution.

Major Functions of the Legislature

(a) Law-Making Function

One of the primary functions of the legislature is law-making. This involves the enactment, amendment, and repeal of laws necessary for the peace, order, and good governance of the state. The law-making function provides the legal foundation for governance and public administration.

(b) Representative Function

The legislature also performs representative functions by protecting and advancing the interests of constituents. Legislators serve as intermediaries between the government and the people by articulating public demands and ensuring that policies reflect societal needs and aspirations.

(c) Oversight Function

Another important function of the legislature is oversight of executive activities. Through committee investigations, hearings, and inquiries, the legislature monitors the conduct of government officials and agencies. Legislative oversight promotes transparency, accountability, and adherence to constitutional principles.

(d) Financial Control Function

The legislature exercises financial control through the approval of budgets, taxation, loans, and public expenditure. Government spending cannot legally occur without legislative authorization, thereby ensuring fiscal accountability and proper management of public resources.

(e) Constitutional Amendment Function

The legislature also participates in constitutional amendment and reform processes. This function enables the state to adjust constitutional provisions to changing political, economic, and social realities within the democratic system.

The Colonial Era and the Origins of Legislative Institutions in Nigeria

(a) The Lagos Legislative Council of 1862

The origin of legislative institutions in Nigeria can be traced to the establishment of the Lagos Legislative Council in 1862 following the annexation of Lagos by the British Crown in 1861. The council was created to assist the colonial governor in making laws for the administration of Lagos Colony. The Lagos Legislative Council represented the first formal legislative institution introduced by the British colonial administration in Nigeria. The council was largely composed of colonial officials and European representatives appointed by the British government, while Nigerians were initially excluded from participation in legislative affairs. Its powers were also limited because legislative authority remained substantially under the control of the colonial governor. Consequently, the council primarily served British imperial and administrative interests rather than democratic representation or indigenous participation in governance.

(b) The Nigerian Council under the 1914 Amalgamation

Following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, Lord Frederick Lugard established the Nigerian Council to facilitate administrative coordination within the newly unified colony. The Nigerian Council functioned mainly as an advisory body with limited legislative powers and could not enact binding laws for the entire country. The council consisted mainly of colonial officials and selected traditional rulers, with minimal representation of Nigerians in decision-making processes. The council lacked effective legislative authority because ultimate powers remained vested in the colonial administration, thereby limiting political participation and representative governance in colonial Nigeria.

The Clifford Constitution of 1922

The Clifford Constitution of 1922 marked a significant stage in the development of legislative institutions in Nigeria. Introduced by Governor Hugh Clifford, the constitution established a Legislative Council for Southern Nigeria with authority to make laws for the colony and the Southern Provinces. The constitution represented the first major attempt by the British colonial administration to introduce limited constitutional and legislative reforms in Nigeria. One of its most notable features was the introduction of elective

representation through the elective principle, which allowed a small number of Nigerians to contest elections into the Legislative Council. This development encouraged the emergence of Nigerian political participation and stimulated political consciousness among educated elites in Lagos and Calabar. The constitution laid the foundation for modern legislative politics and parliamentary representation in colonial Nigeria.

The significance of the Clifford Constitution lies in the fact that it introduced the first electoral system in Nigeria and contributed to the rise of nationalist movements and political parties such as the Nigerian National Democratic Party established by Herbert Macaulay. However, the constitution had several limitations. Northern Nigeria was excluded from the Legislative Council and remained under the control of the Governor through proclamations. Furthermore, the franchise was highly restricted because only a small number of wealthy male adults who met property and income qualifications could vote. These limitations prevented broader democratic participation and reinforced colonial dominance in governance.

The Richards Constitution of 1946

The Richards Constitution of 1946 introduced significant reforms in the legislative development of Nigeria and marked a transition toward greater regional representation in governance. Introduced by Governor Arthur Richards, the constitution aimed to promote the unity of Nigeria while recognizing the country's regional diversity. One of the major developments of the Richards Constitution was the expansion of legislative representation through the inclusion of more Nigerian members in the central Legislative Council. The constitution also introduced the regionalization of legislative institutions by establishing separate regional Houses of Assembly in the Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions. This development enhanced regional participation in governance and laid the foundation for the federal structure later adopted in Nigeria. The constitution contributed to the gradual decentralization of legislative powers and increased indigenous involvement in colonial administration.

Despite these developments, the Richards Constitution had notable weaknesses. The constitution was criticized for the limited consultation with Nigerians during its formulation, as it was largely imposed by the British colonial administration without meaningful indigenous participation. Many Nigerian nationalists rejected the constitution

because it failed to reflect the political aspirations of the people. Furthermore, colonial dominance remained evident since the Governor retained extensive powers over legislative and executive matters, thereby limiting genuine democratic governance and legislative independence in colonial Nigeria.

The Macpherson Constitution of 1951

The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 represented a major turning point in the constitutional and legislative development of Nigeria because it introduced broader Nigerian participation in governance and expanded representative institutions across the country. Introduced by Governor John Macpherson, the constitution emerged after extensive consultations with Nigerians through village, provincial, and regional conferences, making it one of the most participatory constitutional reforms during the colonial period. The Macpherson Constitution significantly increased indigenous involvement in legislative affairs and promoted political inclusiveness within the colonial administration. One of its major contributions was the establishment of a central House of Representatives at the national level, which included representatives from the various regions of Nigeria. The constitution also strengthened regional legislatures by granting greater powers and responsibilities to the Houses of Assembly in the Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions. These reforms enhanced legislative representation and encouraged the development of party politics and nationalist movements in Nigeria.

The importance of the Macpherson Constitution lies in the fact that it laid the foundation for the federal legislative structure subsequently adopted in Nigeria. The constitutional arrangement promoted regional autonomy while maintaining a central legislative framework, thereby preparing Nigeria for self-government and eventual independence. Although the constitution later encountered political challenges and regional tensions, it remained a significant milestone in the evolution of legislative governance in Nigeria.

The Lyttleton Constitution of 1954

The Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 marked a decisive stage in the constitutional and legislative evolution of Nigeria by introducing a full federal system of government. Named after Oliver Lyttleton, the then British Secretary of State for the Colonies, the constitution formally transformed Nigeria into a federation with clearly defined powers between the central and regional governments. One of the key features of the constitution was the clear

division of legislative powers into exclusive, concurrent, and residual lists, thereby reducing conflicts between the central and regional authorities. The constitution also strengthened regional autonomy by granting greater legislative and executive powers to the Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions. This arrangement enabled the regions to exercise substantial control over their internal affairs while remaining under a central federal government. The constitution represented a major step toward constitutional self-government and democratic legislative development in Nigeria.

The legislative impact of the Lyttleton Constitution was significant because it encouraged the emergence of bicameral tendencies within Nigeria's legislative structure and promoted greater self-governance among the regions. The constitution expanded regional legislative institutions and enhanced political participation, thereby preparing Nigeria for independence in 1960. The federal arrangement also strengthened political competition and encouraged the growth of regional political parties and nationalist movements across the country.

Legislature in the First Republic (1960–1966)

The legislature during Nigeria's First Republic was established under the Independence Constitution of 1960 and subsequently strengthened by the Republican Constitution of 1963. These constitutions created a parliamentary system of government modeled after the British Westminster system and provided for a bicameral National Assembly consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives. The bicameral structure was designed to ensure balanced representation and effective law-making within the newly independent Nigerian state. While the Senate functioned as the upper legislative chamber, the House of Representatives served as the lower chamber with broader representation based on population. The constitutions also granted legislative powers to regional Houses of Assembly within the federal structure. The First Republic marked the emergence of indigenous legislative leadership as Nigerians assumed full control of parliamentary governance after colonial rule.

One of the major achievements of the legislature during this period was the operation of a parliamentary system that promoted legislative debate, political participation, and constitutional governance. However, the First Republic also faced serious challenges.

Ethnic politics and regional rivalries weakened legislative unity and intensified political tensions across the country. Electoral crises, particularly the disputed elections of 1964 and the Western Region crisis of 1965, further contributed to political instability and ultimately led to the military coup of January 1966, which terminated the First Republic.

Military Rule and the Decline of Legislative Governance (1966–1979)

The military intervention of January 1966 marked the beginning of a prolonged period of military rule in Nigeria and resulted in the decline of legislative governance and democratic institutions. Following the coup, the military government suspended major provisions of the constitution, dissolved parliament, and centralized governmental powers under military authority. The military regime replaced constitutional governance with authoritarian rule through military decrees, which became the supreme law of the land. As a result, legislative institutions at both federal and regional levels ceased to function, while the executive and legislative powers were concentrated in the hands of military leaders and the Supreme Military Council. This period significantly interrupted the development of parliamentary democracy and legislative independence in Nigeria.

Under successive military regimes, including those of General Yakubu Gowon, General Murtala Mohammed, General Olusegun Obasanjo (military), General Muhammadu Buhari, General Ibrahim Babangida, and General Sani Abacha, legislative institutions were either suspended or severely restricted. The Supreme Military Council and later the Armed Forces Ruling Council functioned as the highest lawmaking bodies, combining executive and legislative powers in a single institution.

Despite the suspension of democratic institutions, certain advisory bodies and constituent assemblies were occasionally established by successive military governments to facilitate constitutional reforms and political transition programmes. These bodies lacked genuine legislative authority because they operated mainly as consultative institutions under strict military control. The absence of elected legislatures during this period weakened democratic culture and reduced public participation in governance. Furthermore, prolonged military rule undermined legislative traditions such as debate, accountability, and representation, thereby creating institutional weaknesses that continued to affect Nigeria's democratic development even after the return to civilian rule.

By the end of the military era in 1999, Nigeria's legislature was re-established under a presidential system, but it inherited a legacy of institutional fragility shaped by decades of non-democratic governance.

The Second Republic Legislature (1979–1983)

The Second Republic of Nigeria, established under the 1979 Constitution, introduced a presidential system of government modelled after the United States constitutional framework. This constitutional arrangement replaced the parliamentary system operated during the First Republic and created a clearer separation of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary. One of the major features of the Second Republic was the retention of a bicameral National Assembly consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives. The constitution also strengthened state legislatures through the establishment of Houses of Assembly in the various states of the federation. Unlike the First Republic, the presidential system granted the legislature greater institutional autonomy and constitutional authority in governance.

The legislature during this period exercised significant powers in relation to law-making, budget approval, oversight, and confirmation of executive appointments. The doctrine of checks and balances under the presidential system enhanced legislative independence and reduced excessive executive dominance in theory. However, the Second Republic legislature encountered several political and institutional challenges. Executive-legislative conflicts frequently emerged over policy implementation, budgetary matters, and political appointments. Allegations of corruption, abuse of office, and financial mismanagement also weakened public confidence in democratic institutions. Increasing political instability and institutional corruption contributed to the collapse of the Second Republic following the military coup of December 1983, which once again suspended constitutional governance and legislative activities in Nigeria.

This period represents the most institutionally developed phase of Nigeria's legislative evolution, particularly in terms of constitutional entrenchment of legislative authority, expansion of oversight functions, and judicial reinforcement of separation of powers. However, despite these formal advancements, the legislature continues to operate within a complex political environment shaped by executive dominance, party control, and institutional constraints.

The Legislature in the Fourth Republic (1999–Present)

The inauguration of the Fourth Republic on 29 May 1999 marked the restoration of democratic governance and legislative institutions in Nigeria after several years of uninterrupted military rule. The legislature under the Fourth Republic derives its authority from the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), which established a presidential system of government based on the doctrine of separation of powers. The constitution created a bicameral National Assembly at the federal level consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives. While the Senate is composed of representatives from the thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory, the House of Representatives is structured on the basis of population and constituencies. In addition to the federal legislature, the constitution also established Houses of Assembly in all the thirty-six states of the federation to perform legislative functions at the state level. The Fourth Republic legislature was specifically designed to prevent excessive concentration of power in the executive by strengthening representative governance, legislative oversight, and institutional accountability. The legislature under the Fourth Republic has become the longest surviving democratic legislative institution in Nigeria's history, thereby representing a major departure from the instability that characterized previous republics.

One of the major achievements of the legislature since 1999 has been its contribution to constitutional development and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The National Assembly has participated actively in constitutional amendment processes aimed at strengthening democratic governance and electoral administration. Several amendments to the 1999 Constitution have addressed issues such as electoral reforms, judicial independence, local government administration, financial autonomy for state legislatures and judiciaries, and timelines for election petitions. These constitutional reforms have improved democratic stability and enhanced institutional development in Nigeria. The legislature has also played a significant role in oversight and accountability through committee investigations, public hearings, and probes into the activities of ministries, departments, and agencies of government. Notable investigations involving corruption, mismanagement of public funds, and abuse of office have demonstrated the legislature's growing oversight capacity. In addition, the legislature has contributed to democratic consolidation through the passage of important laws such as the Electoral Act, Petroleum

Industry Act, and various anti-corruption and public procurement legislations aimed at improving governance and transparency.

Despite these achievements, the Fourth Republic legislature continues to face numerous institutional and political challenges. Corruption allegations and financial scandals have significantly affected public confidence in the National Assembly. Cases involving inflated salaries and allowances, constituency project fraud, and allegations of budget padding have generated widespread criticism against legislators. Corruption within the legislature has weakened public trust and undermined the moral authority of the institution. Another major challenge is executive interference in legislative affairs. Although the constitution guarantees separation of powers, successive administrations have often influenced legislative leadership selection, policy direction, and budgetary decisions. Weak institutional independence and political patronage have therefore limited the effectiveness of legislative oversight in some instances. Furthermore, conflicts between the executive and legislature over budget implementation, ministerial appointments, and confirmation powers have occasionally disrupted governance processes.

In recent years, however, several reforms have been introduced to modernize and strengthen legislative governance in Nigeria. The digitalization of legislative activities, including electronic voting, online committee sessions, and improved public access to parliamentary proceedings, has increased transparency and efficiency within the National Assembly. Electoral reforms have also enhanced the credibility of democratic processes and improved legislative representation. The growing assertiveness of the National Assembly in challenging executive excesses and defending constitutional principles demonstrates the gradual maturation of legislative democracy in Nigeria. Consequently, despite persistent challenges, the legislature in the Fourth Republic remains a vital institution for democratic governance, accountability, and constitutional development in Nigeria.

Judicial Interpretation and Reinforcement of Legislative Authority

The scope and limits of legislative authority in Nigeria have been significantly shaped by judicial interpretation. The judiciary has consistently played a central role in defining the boundaries of legislative competence and reinforcing the doctrine of separation of powers. In *Attorney-General of the Federation v Abubakar*, the Supreme Court affirmed the

constitutional role of the National Assembly in impeachment proceedings, holding that executive officeholders are subject to constitutionally prescribed legislative processes for removal. Similarly, in *Attorney-General of the Federation v Abia State*, the Supreme Court emphasised the constitutional division of powers between the federal and state governments, affirming that each level of government must operate strictly within its legislative competence. In *Attorney-General of Lagos State v Attorney-General of the Federation*, the Court further clarified the scope of legislative competence under the federal system, particularly in relation to matters within the Concurrent Legislative List. The decision underscored the importance of constitutional allocation of powers and reinforced the autonomy of sub-national legislatures within their constitutional limits. Collectively, these judicial decisions demonstrate that legislative authority in Nigeria is not only constitutionally grounded but also judicially protected. They also highlight the judiciary's role in maintaining institutional balance among the arms of government.

Legislative Committees and Institutional Effectiveness

A defining feature of modern legislative practice in Nigeria is the extensive use of committees, which serve as specialised sub-structures within the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly. Legislative committees play a critical role in enhancing efficiency, technical scrutiny, and oversight capacity within the legislative process. Their core functions include detailed examination of bills, monitoring of executive implementation of laws, investigation of public institutions, and policy evaluation. Through these functions, committees ensure that legislative work extends beyond plenary debates into more technical and focused review processes. Committees have been described as the “engine room” of legislative activity, highlighting their centrality to effective parliamentary governance. This is because most substantive legislative scrutiny and oversight functions occur at the committee level rather than in plenary sessions. However, despite their institutional importance, committee effectiveness in Nigeria is often constrained by several structural challenges. These include political interference, party loyalty pressures, limited technical capacity, and weak enforcement of legislative recommendations. In some cases, committees are also affected by executive influence, particularly in matters involving oversight of powerful ministries and agencies. Consequently, while committees are formally designed to strengthen legislative

performance, their practical effectiveness varies significantly depending on institutional capacity, political context, and leadership within the legislature.

Prospects and Recommendations for Strengthening the Nigerian Legislature

Recommendations

1. **Strengthening Legislative Independence:** The independence of the legislature should be protected from executive interference and political manipulation. Effective separation of powers can only exist where the legislature exercises its constitutional functions without undue executive influence.
2. **Capacity Building and Training:** Continuous training should be provided for legislators and legislative staff in areas such as law-making, oversight functions, budgeting, and public policy analysis in order to improve institutional performance and efficiency.
3. **Electoral Reforms:** There is a need for credible electoral reforms to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections. Improved electoral processes will enhance the quality of representation and strengthen public confidence in legislative institutions.
4. **Improved Transparency and Accountability:** Legislative activities should be more transparent through public disclosure of expenditures, stronger ethical standards, and effective anti-corruption mechanisms. Transparency is essential for restoring public trust in legislative governance.
5. **Civic Participation and Public Engagement:** Citizens should be encouraged to participate actively in legislative processes through public hearings, consultations, and easier access to parliamentary proceedings and legislative information.
6. **Constitutional and Institutional Reforms:** Further constitutional reforms are necessary to strengthen legislative autonomy, improve institutional efficiency, and clarify legislative powers within Nigeria's federal structure.
7. **Future Prospects**
8. **Growth of Democratic Culture:** The continued development of democratic values and political participation is expected to strengthen legislative governance in Nigeria.

9. Increased Oversight Role: The legislature is likely to play a more active role in monitoring executive activities and promoting accountability in governance.
10. Technological Modernization of Legislative Processes: The digitalization of parliamentary activities, including electronic voting and virtual committee proceedings, will improve efficiency, transparency, and public participation in legislative governance

Conclusion

The development of the legislature in Nigeria reflects the broader political and constitutional evolution of the Nigerian state from the colonial era to the present democratic dispensation. Legislative institutions in Nigeria originated from colonial administrative structures such as the Lagos Legislative Council of 1862 and subsequently evolved through various constitutional reforms including the Clifford, Richards, Macpherson, and Lyttleton Constitutions. These constitutional developments gradually expanded Nigerian participation in governance and laid the foundation for representative and federal legislative systems. Following independence in 1960, Nigeria experienced both parliamentary and presidential legislative structures, although repeated military interventions disrupted democratic governance and weakened legislative institutions for several decades. However, the return to civilian rule in 1999 restored constitutional governance and strengthened the role of the legislature within Nigeria's democratic framework.

The legislature remains a vital institution in democratic governance because it performs essential functions such as law-making, representation, oversight, budget approval, and constitutional amendment. Effective legislative institutions are fundamental to accountability, constitutionalism, and the protection of democratic values within a state. Since the beginning of the Fourth Republic, the Nigerian legislature has contributed significantly to democratic consolidation through constitutional reforms, legislative oversight, and the enactment of important national laws. Nevertheless, persistent challenges such as corruption, executive interference, weak institutional independence, and political instability continue to hinder legislative effectiveness. Consequently, there is a continuing need for stronger legislative institutions, constitutional reforms, improved

transparency, and greater public participation in order to strengthen democratic governance and ensure sustainable political development in Nigeria.

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