

CORRUPTION AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE LEGISLATIVE INSTITUTION

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Abstract

Corruption is a major obstacle to democratic governance in Nigeria because it weakens the efficacy and credibility of key democratic institutions, particularly the legislature. The legislature is responsible for lawmaking, representation and oversight of the executive, and as such plays a central role in promoting accountability, transparency and good governance. Its efficacy and public standing, however, have been damaged by allegations of bribery, budget manipulation, constituency project fraud, misuse of office and weak oversight. This study examines the manifestations of corruption within the Nigerian legislature, the legal actions taken against implicated legislators and the outcomes of those cases, and the implications of legislative corruption for democratic governance. It adopts a qualitative, desk-based approach in which documentary sources were analysed thematically. These sources include scholarly publications, government and court-related reports, media reports on specific cases, and survey and index data from Transparency International and Afrobarometer. The analysis shows that high-profile allegations against legislators have produced resignations and removals from office but very few convictions. Survey evidence indicates that most Nigerians perceive legislators as corrupt and place little trust in the National Assembly. The study concludes that stronger institutional accountability, transparent legislative processes, effective enforcement of anti-corruption laws, ethical leadership and active citizen participation are essential for improving democratic governance in Nigeria. It therefore recommends comprehensive legislative reforms and stronger oversight mechanisms.

Keywords: Accountability, Bribery, Corruption, Democratic Governance, Legislature, Transparency

Introduction

Corruption is a global problem as established by Transparency International (2026) report that the global average score on its 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index fell to 42 out of 100, with more than two-

thirds of the 182 countries assessed scoring below 50. Weak institutions, limited accountability and poor enforcement of anti-corruption laws are common features of the countries at the bottom of the index. Corruption therefore threatens democratic institutions in many

regions of the world, and Nigeria is not an isolated case.

Nigeria nevertheless illustrates the problem acutely. It scored 26 out of 100 and ranked 142nd out of 182 countries in the same index (Transparency International, 2026). Corruption has been one of the most serious obstacles to democratic stability since independence in 1960. Even after the return to civil rule in 1999, it has continued to weaken public institutions, undermine accountability and reduce citizens' confidence in government (Bisina & Okolie, 2025). Scholars have attributed the failure of Nigeria's successive leaders to consolidate the dividends of democracy largely to corruption (Ogundiya, 2010; Onyekachi, 2020).

The legislature is one of the three arms of government and promotes democracy through lawmaking, representation and oversight of the executive. Allegations of bribery, budget manipulation, contract fraud, constituency project abuses and misuse of public funds have, however, raised concerns about the integrity and effectiveness of Nigeria's legislative institution (Ladi et al., 2025).

Generally speaking, corruption has penetrated the Nigerian state so deeply that virtually every sphere of national life is affected by it. Its effects on the political, cultural and economic landscape are severe, and unless it is remedied, it obstructs the progress of any nation-state (Onyekachi, 2020). Over the years, investigative committees, anti-corruption agencies and the press have exposed cases of corruption in the legislature on a large scale, to the dismay of many Nigerians.

Corruption has persisted across Nigerian government and, politically, it has been linked to the subversion of elections, the rule of law, popular legitimacy and responsible governance (Ogundiya, 2010). Ezeudu (2023) likewise showed that corruption is partly responsible for reduced

economic growth and investment in Nigeria. Political corruption, which is the abuse of entrusted power by political leaders for private gain, has reached scandalous proportions in Nigeria since 1999 (Afolabi, 2025). The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) have uncovered allegations of the theft of billions of dollars of public funds by politicians and political leaders. This underscores how pervasive corruption is in Nigerian politics and is consistent with the country's persistently poor ranking by Transparency International.

Tusalem (2023) argues that the legislature is central to democratic consolidation because it is constitutionally positioned to check executive authoritarianism and to ensure that government delivers public goods and services effectively. The legislature also sustains popular trust and government legitimacy, so its condition at any given time indicates the health of the social contract between government and citizens. In Nigeria, the legislature consists of elected representatives constitutionally empowered to make and amend laws. Any hindrance to its proper functioning is therefore an obstacle to democracy. In the fight against corruption, the lawmaking, representative, oversight and appropriation functions of the legislature are essential to accountability, transparency, probity and due process (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2023). Yet corruption is a major weakness of the institution. Since the beginning of the Fourth Republic, the legislature, which ought to lead the anti-corruption effort, has been overwhelmed by allegations and evidence of corruption among its own members.

Given the importance of the legislature to democratic governance, widespread corruption among lawmakers threatens the deepening of democratic culture, values and processes in Nigeria. It also contributes to the state's failure to deliver

public goods and services adequately. The misappropriation and mismanagement of public funds by politicians and legislators has contributed to a steady decline in public trust in government, democratic institutions and processes (Okoye et al., 2025). Against this background, this study explores the relationship between corruption and democratic governance in Nigeria, with emphasis on the manifestations of corruption within the legislative institution, the legal actions taken against implicated legislators and the implications for democratic consolidation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, desk-based research design that relies on secondary sources. Documents were identified through keyword searches of academic databases and the web, using combinations of the terms corruption, democratic governance, legislature, National Assembly, Nigeria, bribery, and prosecution. Sources were included if they (a) discussed corruption or democratic governance, with particular reference to Nigeria; (b) were scholarly publications, official or institutional reports, index or survey datasets, or reputable media reports on specific cases; and (c) were relevant to the legislature or to legislators' conduct. Where a case was documented only in media reports, outcomes were cross-checked against at least one further report where possible.

The data were analysed through thematic analysis. The sources were read closely and coded into four themes: conceptualisation of corruption, the constitutional role of the legislature, documented cases of legislative corruption and their legal outcomes, and the effects of legislative corruption on democratic governance. The cases of legislative corruption were then compared on the nature of the allegation, the legal action taken and its outcome. Perception data from Transparency International and

Afrobarometer were used to assess the effects on public trust. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary and, for some cases, media sources, and by the fact that perception indices measure perceived rather than actual corruption. It does not establish causation statistically, so the relationships it describes are interpretive.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Corruption: Concept and Dimensions

Corruption, like other forms of social behaviour, is an elusive and complex phenomenon that denotes a negative disposition of attitudes among politicians and public office holders. Scholars and practitioners have not reached a consensus definition because of its ubiquity. Its conception mostly depends on personal gain, the value of the gift, the breaking of rules and how often it occurs (Kuwali, 2024). From a social science perspective, corruption is seen simply as deviation from legal norms, while in administrative terms it is mostly regarded as the diversion of public interest or public goods for personal gain (Agbiboa, 2022). It includes bribery (the use of reward to pervert the judgment of a person in a position of trust), nepotism (appointment on the basis of relationship rather than merit) and misappropriation (the illegal appropriation of public resources for private use). Such definitions are rarely operationalised where corruption is widespread and regarded as the norm by the majority of people.

Deviations from established norms, sabotage of accountability for hidden agendas and any behaviour intended to undermine the system for financial benefit in violation of morally and legally acceptable norms are all forms of corruption (Egberongbe et al., 2025). Perceptions of corruption differ with national values and leadership ideology, so what counts as corruption varies from one system or culture to another. Some cultures and political systems treat certain

practices as normal ways of life, while others condemn them. Nigeria illustrates that corruption is relative to the norms and dominant political culture of each environment. Nevertheless, democratic governance, with its emphasis on accountability and transparency, makes it easier to identify corruption and to see how it manifests in the legislature.

Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2020). This wide-ranging definition covers many acts, but it is often applied to public officials, whether politicians or civil servants, who enrich themselves or their associates unlawfully through the misuse of public power. Corruption also exists in the private sector and has negative consequences for society as a whole. Atoi et al. (2020) similarly describe corruption as a perversion of integrity or of the state of affairs through bribery, favour or moral depravity, a broader definition that includes the moral aspects of official conduct. Ogundiya (2009) listed a still wider range of behaviours, including embezzlement, conflict of interest, bribery, fraud, election rigging, extortion, and manipulation of procurement processes and the falsification of financial records. Yusubboevich (2022) described corruption as an act of giving, promising or offering wrongful satisfaction or compensation, and compared it to an iceberg of which only the tip is visible. Although definitions vary across scholars, in the context of politics and governance corruption refers to the abuse of power and public trust and the misuse of official positions for personal, private or collective gain (Obicci, 2025). It entails departure from the official policies and guidelines that govern the behaviour of public office holders (Heidenheimer et al., 2024).

For the purposes of this paper, legislative corruption is defined as the abuse of legislative office or powers, whether lawmaking, oversight or appropriation, by

members of the National Assembly or State Houses of Assembly for private gain. This includes bribery, the inflation or fraudulent award of contracts, the diversion or misappropriation of public funds, budget padding and the use of legislative powers to shield corrupt interests. This definition is consistent with the view that corruption is facilitated at the level of governance through the misuse of public institutions such as the legislature.

Democratic Governance

Democratic governance emerged from the concepts of democracy and governance. The word democracy derives from the Greek words *demos* (the people) and *kratein* (to rule). Democracy is thus a political system in which the people of a society rule through the form of government they choose to establish (Lalmuansanga & Lalremruata, 2024). Abraham Lincoln, a former president of the United States, famously described it as government of the people, by the people and for the people. In modern democracies, supreme authority is exercised mainly by representatives elected by popular suffrage. Representatives such as legislators (senators, members of the House of Representatives, members of State Houses of Assembly and elected councillors) are, at least in principle, responsible to the electorate, which may remove them by recall or referendum according to legal procedures. In presidential democracies such as the United States, on which Nigeria's system is modelled, both the executive and the legislature are elected. In constitutional monarchies such as the United Kingdom and Norway, only the legislature is elected, and a cabinet and a prime minister are chosen from its ranks (Anckar, 2022). Governance, on the other hand, implies the efficient management of state institutions, including public accountability, transparency in government procedures, the rule of law and public sector management (Sari,

2023). It involves steering state and society towards the realisation of collective goals.

Democratic governance is therefore the organisation of government at all levels and the coordination of citizens' participation in matters that affect their wellbeing. It involves competition for government positions, popular participation in choosing political leaders and the guarantee of human rights. The social and economic wellbeing of the people is as much a part of democratic governance as citizen participation, because a democracy is meaningful to people only if it improves at least their social and economic wellbeing. To ensure broad participation and legitimacy, democratic principles and procedures and the protection of human rights are essential ingredients of genuine and transparent democratic governance (Liambomba, 2023).

Arsad (2023) describes democratic governance as a system of government based on accountability, transparency, participation, the rule of law, respect for human rights and free and fair elections. It ensures that public officials are answerable to citizens and that government institutions operate effectively to promote public welfare. Strengthening democratic governance supports inclusive political processes that improve the participation and political influence of citizens, make governments and institutions more accountable, and build a stronger social contract. Oyeyipo et al. (2024) add that inclusive political processes are an integral part of conflict prevention because they involve the general population in decision-making. Democratic governance in this sense is a system in which political institutions such as the legislature work in line with democratic principles and the rule of law to sustain open and democratic societies.

Corruption and Democratic Governance

Corruption in a democratic society is an aberration because democratic principles rest on the legal order of society. High levels of corruption tend to have more serious consequences for democracies than for other forms of government (Enste & Heldman, 2020), because they erode the mechanisms and essence of democracy. Corruption weakens the link between citizens and the collective decisions that affect them, distorts voting patterns and generates apathy towards meaningful participation (Akoji & Richard, 2024). Béji (2025) links the descent of some societies in North and West Africa into instability, conflict and terrorism partly to elites' determination to remain in power and partly to poor governance caused by corruption. Since political corruption is a deviant behaviour that violates the rules and tenets of democracy, it also threatens the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Corruption wastes resources by distorting government policy away from the interests of the majority. It diverts the energy of public officials and citizens towards easy money instead of productive activity, hampers competitiveness, frustrates poverty alleviation and generates apathy and cynicism. It has also destroyed well-intentioned development projects and undermined good governance in Nigeria (Nwogu, 2023).

The Legislature and Corruption in Nigeria

The Constitutional Role of the Legislature

The legislature consists of elected representatives of specific constituencies who are constitutionally empowered to make laws and to oversee the executive. It embodies popular participation and representation and is therefore the hallmark of electoral democracy (Odibo, 2023). Legislatures differ in composition, structure and function across countries, but their representational, lawmaking, appropriation and oversight functions are

universal and central to deepening democracy. Any attack on the organisation, composition or functioning of the legislature is therefore a serious obstacle to democracy.

Under the 1999 Constitution, the federal and state legislatures in Nigeria perform lawmaking, oversight and investigative, public-funds watchdog and representative functions. Within this framework the legislature is the foremost accountability and anti-corruption institution in the country (Nnajifor & Nnajifor, 2025). It can make laws that strengthen public institutions against corruption, amend rules that undermine probity and create accountability and transparency institutions. The establishment of the EFCC and the ICPC, the two principal anti-corruption agencies, reflects this function. The appropriation and oversight powers of the legislature also allow it to protect public funds and check abuses of power by the executive (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2023). Nigeria's legislators, however, have often been associated with allegations and evidence of large-scale corruption instead of fulfilling this constitutional responsibility.

Historical Context

The challenges confronting the legislature can be understood in the context of prolonged military rule and the nature of Nigerian politics. The repeated dissolution of legislatures after military coups denied them the time and continuity needed to build capacity (Bjørnskov & Voigt, 2025). In addition, the tendency of ruling elites to regard politics as an investment and to personalise state power is a significant factor behind the corrupt activities of some legislators. Some legislators are products of fraudulent elections organised by political godfathers who are motivated by

the financial rewards of influence peddling (Erhunmwunse, 2023).

Documented Cases of Legislative Corruption, Legal Actions and Outcomes

This subsection reviews the principal cases of alleged legislative corruption since 1999, the legal or institutional action taken in each case and its outcome. The cases are summarised in Table 1 and discussed below.

Table 1: Selected cases of alleged legislative corruption in Nigeria from 1999 to 2012 with actions taken and outcomes

Legislator(s)	Year	Allegation	Action taken	Outcome
Evan Enwerem (Senate President)	1999	Allegations of falsified personal records and corruption	Senate committee investigation	Removed from office 18 Nov 1999; no conviction found in sources reviewed
Chuba Okadigbo (Senate President)	2000	Contract inflation and overspending on official furnishings	Senate panel report; impeachment vote	Removed 8 Aug 2000; kept Senate seat; no conviction found in sources reviewed
Adolphus Wabara and others	2005	N55 million bribe for approval of education budget	ICPC arraignment	Resigned April 2005; charges later quashed by Court of Appeal
Patricia Etteh (Speaker)	2007	N628 million spent on residences and vehicles	House investigative panel	Resigned 30 Oct 2007; no criminal prosecution
Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello	2008	N10 million from N300 million unspent health budget	EFCC charge	Application to quash refused; trial fixed for Oct 2008; final outcome not verified
Ndudi Elumelu, Jibo Mohammed, Nicholas Ugbane	2009	N5.2 billion Rural Electrification Agency contracts	EFCC charge	Elumelu freed March 2012; charges against all three quashed June 2013
Dimeji Bankole (Speaker)	2011	Contract inflation (about N894 million); earlier case on N38 billion loans	EFCC arraignment	Acquitted January 2012 (loans) and February 2014 (contracts)
Herman Hembe and Chris Azubogu	2012	Alleged bribe demand and receipt of SEC funds	EFCC charge	Case struck out by Court of Appeal

Source: Compiled by the authors (2026).

The Senate

The Senate was embroiled in controversy almost immediately after its inauguration in 1999. Senators reportedly received N850, 000 each to vote Evan Enwerem into office as Senate President instead of Chuba Okadigbo, and they collected N5 million each as a furniture allowance against the N3.5 million declared publicly (Aliu, 2013). Enwerem was removed from office on 18 November 1999 after a Senate committee investigated allegations against

him, but he remained a senator until 2003 (Abraham, 2016). His successor, Okadigbo, was impeached by the Senate on 8 August 2000 on the basis of a panel report that accused him of inflating contracts and overspending on official furnishings. The Senate voted overwhelmingly to remove him, although he retained his Senate seat (Abraham, 2016; IRIN, 2000). In both cases, the sanction was political removal and neither case produced a criminal conviction, as far as the sources reviewed show.

In 2005, Senate President Adolphus Wabara resigned after President Obasanjo publicly accused him and other legislators of sharing a bribe of N55 million paid by the Education Minister, Fabian Osuji, to secure approval for the ministry's inflated budget (Mail & Guardian, 2005). The ICPC arraigned Wabara, Osuji and others, but the case dragged on for years. The Court of Appeal in Abuja eventually quashed the charges and discharged the accused on the ground that the prosecution had failed to establish a *prima facie* case (Alabi, 2025). In 2008, Senator Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello, then Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, was charged by the EFCC with receiving N10 million of the N300 million unspent 2007 health ministry budget, a sum her committee said was support for a retreat. The court refused her application to quash the charges and fixed trial for October 2008 (Sahara Reporters, 2008a, 2008b).

The House of Representatives

The House of Representatives has experienced comparable scandals. In 2007, Speaker Patricia Etteh was investigated over the spending of N628 million on renovating official residences and purchasing vehicles. She resigned on 30 October 2007, together with her deputy, to avoid impeachment (Sahara Reporters, 2007). The House later recorded that it had no record of her indictment, and no criminal prosecution followed (Okonkwo, 2016).

Her successor, Dimeji Bankole, was arraigned by the EFCC in June 2011, after he left office, on a 16-count charge that included the inflation of contracts to the tune of about N894 million (Sahara Reporters, 2011). A Federal High Court discharged and acquitted him in 2014 because the six prosecution witnesses did not link him to any wrongdoing (PM News, 2014). In an earlier, separate case over loans of about N38 billion, he and his deputy, Usman Nafada, had been

discharged and acquitted in January 2012 (Channels Television, 2012).

Lawmakers have also been accused of corruption in the performance of their oversight functions. In 2009, the EFCC charged the chairman of the House Committee on Power, Ndudi Elumelu, his deputy Jibo Mohammed and the Senate Committee Chairman, Nicholas Ugbane, in connection with N5.2 billion in Rural Electrification Agency contracts. A Federal High Court freed Elumelu in March 2012 and the EFCC appealed (Sweetcrude, 2012). In June 2013, an Abuja High Court quashed the charges against Ugbane, Elumelu and Mohammed and discharged them (PM News, 2013). In 2012, the Director-General of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Arunma Oteh, accused the chairman of the House Committee on Capital Markets, Herman Hembe, of demanding a bribe from her during a probe of the capital market. Hembe denied the allegation. The EFCC charged him and his deputy, Chris Azubogu, but the Court of Appeal later threw out the case and criticised the way the agency had handled it (Aiyede, 2014).

Implications of the Outcomes

Three patterns emerge from these cases. First, allegations of legislative corruption have frequently triggered resignation or removal from leadership positions, so internal sanction has been more common than criminal conviction. Second, prosecutions have been slow and have often collapsed on procedural grounds or for insufficient evidence, as the Wabara, Bankole, Elumelu and Hembe cases show. Third, the reversal of high-profile prosecutions reduces the deterrent effect of anti-corruption law and strengthens the impression that powerful politicians are shielded from accountability. At the same time, acquittals do not establish guilt, and several defendants maintained that the cases against them were politically

motivated. What the cases demonstrate is that the accountability mechanisms meant to deter legislative corruption have produced few final judgments. Arguably, the sums involved, whether proven or only alleged, are large relative to the funding gaps in education, health care, roads and other social services.

Corruption in the Legislative Institution and the Challenge to Democratic Governance

The effects of legislative corruption on democratic governance can be traced through three mechanisms: public trust, the legislature's capacity to perform its functions, and its willingness to protect the anti-corruption framework. Each is discussed below with the evidence available.

Public Trust and Perception

Corruption among legislators erodes public trust in government and support for democracy. Citizens' trust depends on the perceived effectiveness and impartiality of institutions (Izuchukwu et al., 2024). Survey data show a low level of trust in the legislature. In the 2022 Afrobarometer survey of 1,600 Nigerians, 51.8% said they trusted parliament "not at all" and a further 30.0% "just a little", while only 17.0% trusted it "somewhat" or "a lot" (Afrobarometer, 2023). The same survey found that 63.4% of respondents believed that "most" or "all" Members of Parliament were corrupt. In the 2024 survey, 65% of respondents said most or all National Assembly officials were involved in corruption (NOIPolls, 2025). These data measure perception and not proven corruption, but they show that large majorities of citizens regard the legislature as corrupt and hold little trust in it, which is consistent with the pattern of unresolved scandals described above.

Capacity to Perform Constitutional Functions

The permissiveness of corruption weakens the capacity of the legislature to perform its duty of strengthening accountability and transparency. Revelations of corruption undermine legislators' moral authority to entrench probity in government, and a legislature compromised by corruption cannot credibly protect citizens against executive arbitrariness (Tusalem, 2023; Okoye et al., 2025). When oversight functions become opportunities for private gain, as alleged in the power-sector and capital-market cases above, the oversight function is itself discredited. Some authors link this condition to broader governance failures and to the risk of authoritarian drift (Tanneberg, 2020; Peters, 2024). It should be noted that the available evidence supports an association between legislative corruption and weakened governance outcomes, but it does not by itself prove a causal link.

Protection of the Anti-Corruption Framework

Corrupt legislators may use legislative powers to weaken the institutions that hold them accountable. For example, the amendment of the ICPC law by the Senate in 2003 has been interpreted as weakening the commission's investigative and prosecutorial powers, despite being presented as a means of strengthening it (Oni, 2021). The National Assembly was also criticised for its initial reluctance to pass the Freedom of Information legislation, which was designed to facilitate access by civil society and the media to information held by public institutions (Udombana, 2019).

Implications for Democratic Consolidation

Taken together, the evidence suggests that legislative corruption in Nigeria undermines democratic consolidation mainly by lowering public trust and by weakening the institutional checks the

legislature is meant to provide. Low trust can reduce citizens' willingness to take part in political processes, with consequences for political stability and democratic consolidation (Madueke, 2026). However, this study did not measure political participation directly, and further research using turnout, survey and case data is needed to test the link between specific scandals and changes in participation or trust.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

The legislature, as the institution that embodies the popular will, is critical to deepening democracy in Nigeria, and its constitutional powers make it the foremost accountability and anti-corruption institution in the country. Corruption among legislators, which has been attributed to the prebendal inclinations of the ruling elite, has weakened its performance since 1999. The review of cases shows that scandals have produced resignations and removals but very few final convictions, and that perception data point to low public trust in the National Assembly. The credibility of the legislature has been damaged, with implications for trust and participation in governance, and persistent allegations undermine the anti-corruption drive. The study therefore finds that legislative corruption is a threat to democratic governance in Nigeria, while noting that the causal pathways require further empirical research.

Concerted measures are needed to reduce corruption among legislators. Ruling elites must reassess the transactional politics that has become the dominant face of governance and provide purposeful, principled leadership within the framework of democracy and good governance. Political parties must promote internal democracy, since its absence in most parties of the Fourth Republic allowed godfathers to impose candidates and has contributed to deepening

corruption. Prosecutions of legislators also need to be faster and better prepared, so that cases are decided on their merits instead of collapsing on procedural grounds. Finally, the capacity-building and informational functions of civil society organisations and the media, and their continuing scrutiny of corruption and abuse of power in the National Assembly, should be maintained to ensure effective democratic governance in Nigeria.

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