POVERTY, AUTONOMY AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: This study undertakes a philosophical exploration of the relationship between material deprivation and democratic participation in Nigeria. It interrogates the moral and political implications of conducting elections in contexts where poverty severely constrains individual autonomy and distorts the collective will of deprived people. As an exercise in philosophy, the analysis adopts the radical approach over the empirical model of sovereignty. The paper questions whether the democratic outcome in such settings can be considered truly representative or what an approximate of democracy. It juxtaposes liberal democratic ideals with real-world electoral practices shaped by clientelism, a sense of hopelessness and systemic inequality and whether the intersection between ideal and its application creates legitimacy for the model of democracy in practice. Furthermore, the paper engages with the idea of technocratic alternatives such as in the Chinese model not as a prescription, but as a potential alternative philosophical provocation that can enable one to reconsider what constitutes appropriate rule in societies where freedom of choice is undermined by poverty conditions. In the end, the paper calls for the need to redefine and reimagine democracy to prioritizes human dignity and provide substantive freedom over mere proceduralism or other democratic simulacra like the ones that exists in Nigeria.
Keywords: structural poverty, democracy, democratic participation, legitimacy, autonomy, political justice, African philosophy, Nigeria

Rezumat: Acest studiu întreprinde o explorare filosofică a relației dintre privațiunile materiale și participarea democratică în Nigeria. Analiza interoghează implicațiile morale și politice ale desfășurării alegerilor în contexte în care sărăcia constrânge sever autonomia individuală și distorsionează voința colectivă a persoanelor defavorizate. Ca exercițiu de filosofie, analiza adoptă abordarea radicală în detrimentul modelului empiric al suveranității. Studiul pune sub semnul întrebării dacă rezultatul democratic în astfel de contexte poate fi considerat cu adevărat reprezentativ sau, este mai degrabă o aproximare a democrației. Prezenta analiză juxtapune idealurile democratice liberale cu practicile electorale din lumea reală, influențate de clientelism, deznădeje și inegalitate sistemică, interogând dacă intersecția dintre ideal și aplicarea sa creează legitimitate pentru modelul aplicat al democrației. Mai mult, studiul abordează ideea alternativelor tehnocratice, cum ar fi în modelul chinezesc, nu ca o prescripție, ci ca o potențială

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provocare filosofică alternativă care poate permite reconsiderarea a ceea ce se constituie într-o guvernare adecvată în societăţile în care libertatea de alegere este subminată de condiţiile marcate de precaritate. În cele din urmă, studiul subliniază necesitatea redefinirii şi reimaginării democraţiei în vederea prioritizării demnităţii umane şi a respectării libertăţii în deplinătatea sa, în contrast cu abordări procedurale sau alte simulacre democratice precum cele existente în Nigeria.

Cuvinte cheie: sărăcie structurală, democraţie, participare democratică, legitimitate, autonomie, justiţie politică, filosofie africană, Nigeria

I. Introduction

In the classic understanding, democracy is grounded on the premise of individual autonomy i.e. the capacity of citizens to reason, deliberate and make informed choices regarding the direction of their political community. Rooted in the Enlightenment ideals, democratic theory assumes as certain reference points the ideals of freedom, education, and economic security without which the citizens' political agency may be fundamentally impaired[1]. Yet, for many societies in the Global South, predominantly in Africa, these prerequisites are a far cry from what democratic theory envisions. Nigeria offers a blunt illustration of this paradox: a formal democracy where the majority of the electorate struggle with the incapacitating effects of poverty, illiteracy, and systemic exclusion. In such a context, a persistent philosophical question emerges: can a democracy flourish where the people are not fully free to choose? Or better put, how does the state of poverty relative to political legitimacy impact the practice of democracy in Nigeria?

Democracy essentially is not simply the act of voting but an expression of the autonomous will within a just political system. As Amartya Sen argues, freedom is both the end and the means of development since without economic and social freedom, political freedoms are hollow[2]. In Nigeria, where over 60% of the population lives below the poverty line, democratic involvement often degenerates into a transactional exercise shaped by immediate material needs rather than by enduring political principles and convictions[3]. Citizens are not purely "free voters" but distressed and desperate individuals circumventing a structure that exchange their votes for bags of rice, cash tokens, or empty promises. This reality calls into question the moral legitimacy of democracy via

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[1] John Dewey, "Democracy and Educational Administration", *School and Society* 45, no. 1167 (1937): 457.

[2] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 152.

[3] World Bank, *Nigeria Development Update: The Continuing Urgency of Business Unusual* (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2022), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/0997400 06132214750/pdf/P17782005822360a00a0850f63928a34418.pdf.

electoral outcomes. As Philip Petit notes, freedom in the republican sense involves non-domination and the ability to make unforced choices i.e. conditions that poverty systematically undermines[4].

The commodification of votes through clientelism and vote-buying reduces the electorate to mere instruments in the hands of the political elites and this, in turn, distorts democratic competition and establishes the rule from the top or of the highest bidders rather than the that of the most competent or just leaders. This situation aptly reflects Rousseau's concern that inequality can corrupt the general will, rendering elections mere expressions of power rather than true reflections of collective autonomy[5]. In this light, democracy in Nigeria though procedurally active yet, is basically compromised. It is a democracy of appearance rather than essence, a "façade democracy"[6] where elections occur, but in the absence of democratic virtues of accountability, justice and equality.

The dilemma of the democratic outcomes led some to consider alternative governance models that emphasize merit, order and long-term planning over mass electoral participation. The Chinese model of elite-led, technocratic governance can be seen as an example where competence and state-driven development are prioritized, albeit at the expense of liberal democratic norms[7]. While this model is not without shortcomings, particularly as it undermines human rights and dissent, it poses a challenging question for democracy in Nigeria: is procedural democracy sustainable or even desirable in conditions of mass poverty? This paper rejects any authoritarian premises, but, rather, calls for a reconsideration of what democracy must mean in societies where poverty essentially limits human agency and autonomy. It advocatess for a philosophical shift from a procedural understanding of democracy to a functional one where political legitimacy is not measured by the number of routine elections but by the degree to which citizens are empowered to act as free and informed agents

To pursue these questions systematically, the study is structured into five sections. Following the introductory section, the second section examines the relationship between poverty and political autonomy, by drawing on the capability approach of Amatya Sen and Martha Nussbaum as well as on classical notions of freedom in political philosophy. The third section interrogates the phenomenon of electoral manipulation, exploring how hunger-driven choices undermine democratic legitimacy and reduce elections to rituals devoid of

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[4] Philip Pettit, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 76.
[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 50. Originally published in 1762.
[6] Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 24
[7] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 113.

substantive agency. The fourth section engages the normative debate on political participation, contrasting liberal democratic universalism with meritocratic or elite-driven alternative such as the Chinese political model, supported by theorists like Daniel A. Bell. The fifth section critically evaluates these models and proposes a reimagined conception of democracy grounded in African philosophical tradition, particularly drawing from the participatory and justice-oriented framework articulated by Claude Ake. The analysis concludes by reflecting on the moral burden of sustaining democracy in conditions of deprivation and the need for substantive, rather than merely procedural freedom. Overall, the paper is guided by a philosophical framework that combines capability theory, the republican notion of freedom and African communitarian political thought, enabling the development of a multidimensional interrogation of how poverty constrains autonomy, distorts legitimacy, and challenges the very meaning democratic rule.

II. Theoretical Framework and Philosophical Approach

This paper is premised on a multidisciplinary philosophical framework that brings together political philosophy, African philosophical thought and critical social theory to interrogate the tension between poverty, autonomy, and democratic legitimacy. The analysis proceeds from the assumption rooted in both liberal and republican traditions that political agency requires a minimum threshold of material and social capability. In this regard, the paper adopts Amatya Sen's[8] and Martha Nussbaum's[9] *capability approach* as a foundation for understanding how deprivation undermines the substantive freedoms necessary for meaningful democratic participation. This approach is complemented by republican notion of freedom, particularly Philip Pettit's idea that domination restricts non-arbitrary choice, which is used to explain how economic vulnerability transforms citizens into politically dependent subjects susceptible to manipulation. Additionally, the framework integrates Africa communitarian political theory, with special emphasis on Claude Ake's critique of liberal democracy and his call for participatory, justice-oriented and culturally grounded democratic structures in Africa.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a philosophical-analytical approach. This involves critically examining the conceptual linkages between poverty, autonomy, and legitimacy and interrogating normative assumptions embedded in democratic theory. Rather than conducting empirical fieldwork, the study relies on conceptual analysis, normative reasoning and comparative theoretical

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[8] Amartya Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985).
[9] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

evaluation. This approach is appropriate because the central task is not to measure voter behavior statistically but to explain and evaluate the moral and political implication of conducting elections under conditions of extreme deprivation. By interrogating existing philosophical argument and political models, the paper aims to further contribute to the broader discourse on democratic ethics and political justice in Africa.

The selection of the philosophical sources is guided by three main criteria. First, sources were selected from major traditions in political philosophy, including liberalism (John Rawls and Isaiah Berlin respectively), republicanism (Philip Pettit) and communitarianism (Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye) to ensure a plurality of perspectives on autonomy, freedom, and democratic legitimacy. Second, the paper draws on African political philosophers such as Claude Ake and Kwasi Wiredu because their works offer a contextually grounded critique of Western democratic models and provide unique insights relevant to African political conditions. Third, the paper incorporates contemporary theorists of meritocracy and technocracy, such as Daniel A. Bell whose work on the Chinese political model provides a contrasting framework for thinking about political participation in societies heavily burdened by inequality.

In analyzing these sources, the paper adopts a critical-hermeneutic method focusing on how each thinker conceptualizes key ideals such as autonomy, justice, legitimacy, and participation. Texts are not treated merely as repositories of arguments but as interventions shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts. The analysis is therefore comparative and reconstructive, seeking to understand not only what each theorist argues but also how their ideas illuminate the African experience of democracy under conditions of structural poverty.

III. Poverty and the Erosion of the Political Autonomy

At the heart of any democratic society lies the assumption that citizen are expected to make rational, informed, and autonomous decisions. However, the presence of prevalent poverty calls this assumption into question. In political philosophy, autonomy is not merely the absence of coercion but the presence of conditions that enable one to act meaningfully and deliberately. Isaiah Berlin's distinction between "negative" and "positive" liberty is helpful here: while a poor person may not be physically coerced to vote in a certain way (negative liberty), their circumstances may render them incapable of making a genuinely

free choice (positive liberty)[10]. Inadvertently, poverty becomes a powerful form of coercion from a democratic perspective.

In Nigeria, where poverty is endemic, this lack of autonomy becomes politically dangerous. The 2023 elections for instance witnessed pervasive reports of massive vote-buying and electoral fraud, with some candidates openly distributing food and cash in exchange for support. In many rural areas where state presence is minimal and access to social services is virtually non-existent, these gifts were not perceived as corruption but as immediate survival strategy. As Ake notes, African politics often become "a matter of life and death", not of ideology[11]. Under such conditions, the electorate becomes more vulnerable to manipulation, not due to ignorance or moral failure, but due to a rational calculation within an unjust socioeconomic arrangement and circumstances. This instrumentalization of poverty in the political process weakens the moral basis for democratic validity. According to Rawls, a just society is one where social and economic inequalities are arranged to benefit the least advantaged[12]. When poverty becomes a tool for political manipulation rather than a condition to be alleviated, the political system itself becomes complicit in propagating unfairness. In this case, election, rather than being a means of rectifying injustice, becomes an instrument through which unfairness is embedded.

Additionally, poverty impairs the faculties needed for meaningful political participation. Access to education, healthcare, and reliable information essential for civic engagement are often beyond reach for a large part of the Nigerians population. This not only affects voting but the capacity to understand, interpret, and interrogate political discourse. Paulo Freire argues that oppressed individuals, if not critically aware of their situation, may internalize and suppress their subjugation and participate in systems that reproduce it[13]. In Nigeria, many voters have come to accept corruption and incompetence as inevitable political realities, creating a dangerous cycle of fatalism.

Beyond the individual, poverty also shapes the structural environment in which politics develops. Political parties lacking ideological depth and coherence, often function as patronage machines whose success depends on their ability to mobilize resources to secure electoral victory. The focus of these parties is not on building stronger and sustainable institutions or articulating or projecting visionary policies, but on distributing immediate material relief as rewards for party loyalty. This has deep implication: democracy, ideally a collective deliberation on the common good, is then reduced to a transactional

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[10] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 131.

[11] Claude Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1996), 8.

[12] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 3.

[13] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 72.

market of short-term gains. As Michael Sandel argues, when market logic pervades an area meant to be governed by moral reasoning, such as politics, civil virtue is completely eroded[14].

It is therefore imperative to note that this situation may not be exclusive to Nigeria. In his analysis of populism in Latin America, De La Torre observes that poverty often makes citizens defenceless and susceptible to charismatic leaders who offer symbolic inclusion but deliver little or no structural change[15]. Nonetheless, what makes Nigeria's case predominantly glaring is the scale of poverty and the fragility of its institutions. The yawning gap between the political elite and the vast populace is not just economic but also epistemic: the rulers and the ruled live in fundamentally different realities, which further complicates democratic accountability and responsibility. This raises the following questions: can consent be meaningful in the absence of basics needs? And if a person votes not out of conviction but out of desperation, can that vote be said to confer legitimacy to the elected? Rousseau warned that when inequality becomes extreme, the social contract ceases to reflect a collective will and begins to mirror the will of the powerful[16]. In such cases, elections become rituals of consent rather than genuine expressions of democratic choice.

Consequently, addressing the role of poverty in politics is not only a matter of policy but also a philosophical imperative. It compels a re-assessment of foundational democratic ideals, particularly the notion of equal moral worth. If all citizens are to be treated as equals in the political process, then the structures that deny some members of that society the capacity to have autonomy must be seen as an ethical violation, not just as an administrative failure. Until poverty is addressed as a barrier to freedom and dignity, democracy in Nigeria and in similar contexts will remain profoundly problematic.

IV. The Illusion of Choice: Election, Manipulation, and Democratic Façade

Democracy is often celebrated as the most legitimate form of governance because it ostensibly reflects the will of the people. In practice, however, the procedural mechanisms of democracy, most notably the elections, can become rituals of legitimacy that mask deep political dysfunction and inequality. In Nigeria, the appearance of electoral competition does no always

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[14] Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 110.
[15] Carlos de la Torre, "Populism and the Politics of the Extraordinary in Latin America" *Journal of Political Ideologies* 21, no. 2 (2016): 121.
[16] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 58.

equate to genuine or meaningful participation. What exists is not a robust democratic culture but what theorists term as "façade democracy", a system where democratic institutions exist in form but are functionally hollow[17].

Central to this façade lies the illusion of electoral choice. Citizens are often given the ballot that features a rotating cast of political elites drawn from the same socio-political class, with little or no ideological distinction between them. Party platforms in Nigeria tend to be vague, interchangeable, driven less by policy conviction and more by individual politicians' personalities and networks. This breeds what Sartori called a "cartel democracy," where political competition becomes collusion among elites to manage and alternate in power without true transformation[18]. Furthermore, the electoral process itself is plagued with manipulations. Incidents of ballot-box snatching, voters' suppression, falsified results, and intimidation of electoral officers are common in various regions. Such occurrences not only undermine the legitimacy of the outcome but create a general atmosphere of disillusionment[19].

The problem here is not simply that elections are flawed, but that they no longer function as a mechanism for accountability. Rather than enabling the people to choose their leaders, the process is increasingly manipulated to ensure predetermined outcomes, thereby eroding trust in the entire democratic structure as in the case of Nigeria. This distrust breeds political apathy overtime among youths. For example, voters' turnout in Nigeria in recent years has be declining sharply; with the 2023 presidential election recording only a 27% voter turnout – the lowest since 1999[20]. Such figures point not only to a disinterest in politics but also to a deep-seated disillusionment with the possibilities offered by the ballot. People increasingly feel that their vote do not matter, that change is impossible through the system. As Fanon noted in his reflections on colonialism and post-colonial betrayal, the oppressed often come to see political processes as extensions of their alienation rather than instruments of liberation[21].

In philosophical terms, this represents a crisis of legitimacy. Marx Webber argued that legitimacy is what transforms *naked power* into recognized

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[17] Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy", 24; Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008), 16.

[18] Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 297.

[19] Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), *Post-Election Report on the 2023 General Elections* (Abuja: INEC, 2023), https://inecnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2023-GENERAL-ELECTION-REPORR-1pdf.

[20] Yiaga Africa, *Dashed Hopes? Report on the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Elections* (Abuja: Yiaga Africa, 2023), 9, https://yiaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Dashed-Hopes-Yiaga-Africa-Report-on-the-2023-General-Election_.pdf.

[21] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 27.

authority[22]. In Nigeria, the repeated abuse of democratic procedures without substantive outcomes has led to a hollowing-out of political legitimacy. When people no longer believe in the system, they either withdraw or turn to alternative forms of loyalty such as ethnic, religious, or revolutionary. This dynamic explains the rise of secessionists' sentiments in Nigeria's Southeast region and in other regions, along with widespread mistrust in state institutions, and the increasing popularity of charismatic, often messianic non-state actors.

Moreover, the illusion of democratic choice is further compounded by the monetization of political participation. To contest elections in Nigeria requires enormous financial capital. Political aspirants must pay exorbitant nomination fees, run expensive campaigns, and often bribe party officials or delegates to secure tickets[23]. This creates a system where only the wealthy or those sponsored by the wealthy can viably compete for power. Thus, the electoral process systematically excludes the very citizens it claims to empower. As Aristotle warned in *Politics,* when a polity is governed by the rich rather for the good of the whole, it degenerates into oligarchy[24].

The situation in Nigeria today bears such uncomfortable similarities. Political office has become a means of wealth accumulation rather than service and elections are the gateway to economic privilege. This commodification of power turns the democratic process into a marketplace of interests where voters are bought, loyalty is leased, and public service are replaced by private gains[25]. It is no surprise that many politicians switch parties regularly not because of some major ideological shift but out of strategic calculations. This distortion of democratic values emphasizes the need to go beyond proceduralism in defining democracy. As Chantal Mouffe argues, democracy is not just about rules and procedures but about the ongoing struggles for inclusion, recognition, and justice[26]. If elections no longer serve this function, then they must be critically re-evaluated, not abolished but reformed. The illusions of choice must give way to genuine political alternatives, informed by civic education, robust debate, and institutional integrity.

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[22] Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 78. Originally published in 1919.

[23] INEC, *Post-Election Report*, 2023.

[24] Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1280a-b.

[25] Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa*, 7.

[26] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 99.

V. Between Merit and Representation: Should Democracy Be for All?

One of the enduring tensions in political philosophy is the balance between universal participation and merit-based governance. While modern liberal democracies uphold the principle of political equality of *one person one vote*, this ideal is often challenged in practice where material deprivation, low political literacy, and elite manipulation shape political outcomes. Nigeria exemplifies this dilemma. If democratic representation becomes compromised by systemic poverty and clientelism, should such a society consider limiting participation to the educated or the economically stable, as seem in the elite-driven systems like China's? Or would such a move betray the ethical foundations of democracy itself? As Bell puts it: such system privileges the educated and politically competent in the selection of leaders, operating on the assumption that rule by the best yields better outcomes than rule by the many, especially when the many are poor, uninformed or easily manipulated[27].

To begin, the ideal of universal suffrage is rooted in the concept of moral equality that is the idea that each person possesses equal worth and should therefore have an equal voice in the determination of collective affairs. This principle, essential to the political philosophies of thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, is the bedrock of democratic legitimacy. Rousseau, for example, argued that sovereignty resides in the general and all citizens must be equal participants in its expression[28]. Consequently, any limitation on this participation would fracture the political body and reduce democracy to oligarchy or tyranny. Nevertheless, the historical record of democratic thought includes a parallel tradition that is far more sceptical of mass participation. In *The Republic*, Plato famously argued that the rule of the many would result in chaos, as the average citizen lacks the knowledge and discipline necessary for wise governance. He advocated for the rule of philosopher-kings – individuals trained in reason, virtue, and the art of ruling[29]. This tension between competence and inclusion continues to shape debates around technocracy, meritocracy, and elite governance in modern political systems to this day.

However, the Chinese model offers a contemporary variant of this Platonic ideal. Governance is centralized within the Communist Party and the leaders are promoted through a rigorous system of performance-based evaluation, education, and party loyalty. While this system limits popular participation, it arguably enables long-term planning, stability, and development-

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[27] Bell, *The China Model*, 17.

[28] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 71.

[29] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 473c–d. Originally published ca. 380 BCE.

focused governance[30]. Given Nigeria's history of populist politics, electoral violence, and development failure, some have provocatively asked: could such a model work in Nigeria? On a certain level, the appeal is understandable. If democracy has consistently produced leaders who are corrupt, incompetent, or unaccountable and if the poor are routinely exploited during elections, then a system that prioritizes expertise over populism seems attractive.

The key argument here is that rule by the informed few (*Epistocracy*)[31], rather than the manipulated many, could better serve national development goals. But this may also raise troubling philosophical questions as to who determines what counts as "merit"? Who decides which citizens are "fit" to vote or govern? These questions echo colonial logics that excluded indigenous population on grounds of cultural inferiority or educational inadequacy. To embrace elite rule therefore risks reproducing structural disenfranchisement, deepening existing inequality, and entrenching power in the hands of a self-perpetuating class. As Amatya Sen cautions, development without democratic participation is prone to paternalism and alienation[32].

African philosophical traditions also serve as a challenge to this elitist orientation. Communitarian thinkers like Kwasi Wiredu and J.S. Mbiti emphasize consensus-building, dialogue, and the communal exercise of political power. Wiredu stresses that traditional African systems valued inclusive deliberation, even if formal voting was absent[33]. Power was not simply handed to the most educated or powerful, but earned through moral integrity, service, and the trust of the community. This suggests that democracy in Africa must be reimagined not as an import of the Western liberalism or Chinese authoritarianism, but as a hybrid system rooted in indigenous values and modern realities. Rather than restricting participation, therefore, the more just and philosophically coherent approach is to enhance the quality of participation. This means investing in civic education, public deliberations, and institutional accountability. It means creating structures that allow for qualified leadership to emerge without disenfranchising the poor or less educated. As Martha Nussbaum argues, democracy must be about creating the condition under which people flourish not just politically, but socially, economically, and intellectually[34]. In this light, the central question is not whether democracy should be for all, but

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[30] Bell, *The China Model*, 107.

[31] Epistocracy is a proposed alternative to democracy in which political power is distributed according to knowledge or competence rather than equally among all citizens. The term comes from the Greek *episteme (*knowledge*) kratos* (rule or power), literally meaning "rule of the knowledgeable. While democracy is based on the principle of "one person, one vote," epistocracy argues that political decisions should be made or, at least, heavily influenced by those who are better informed, more educated, or more competent in political matters.

[32] Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 148.

[33] Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 185.

[34] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 36.

how democracy can be made realistically inclusive. Inclusion does not mean reducing all voices to the same level regardless of knowledge or experience; rather, it means ensuring that every citizen has the opportunity to develop and express their political agency. This is where Nigeria's current challenge lies, not in limiting democracy, but in deepening it, so that it becomes a tool of liberation rather than manipulation.

VI. Reimagining Democracy Beyond the Ballot: A Call for Substantive Freedom

The repeated failures of procedural democracy in poverty-stricken societies such as Nigeria point to a critical philosophical oversight rooted in the conflation of democracy with the ballot-box. Elections, while essential to the democratic process, are not a sufficient condition for democratic legitimacy or political justice. A society may hold regular, multi-party elections and still be deeply undemocratic if its political structures exclude the majority from the real decision-making process or if the socio-economic conditions prevent citizens from making free and informed choices. This situation necessitates a radical shift in how democracy is conceptualized not merely as a period of voting, but as the institutionalization of substantive freedom.

Amartya Sen's capability approach provided a useful framework for the rethinking of democracy in this light. According to Sen, development should be understood as the expansion of people's capabilities, of their actual freedom to live the kinds of lives they value[35]. In this account, democracy is not merely a system of governance, but a condition of empowerment; a space where the individuals have access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and the civic tools necessary for informed participation, without which democratic participation becomes a hollow ritual, because voting under conditions of hunger, ignorance, and manipulation is no more democratic than coerced submission.

In Nigeria, the failure to provide such substantive freedoms has invariably led to the institutionalization of poverty within the democratic framework. Citizens are invited periodically to participate in the political process, but the terms of their participation are defined by structural deprivation. Their votes are counted, but their voices are not heard; their agency is solicited, yet their dignity is undermined. This paradox is what Fanon termed the "colonial legacy of mimicry" where institutions are adopted in form but stripped of their liberatory content and intent[36]. The ballot becomes a spectacle, a mechanism of false inclusion that legitimizes the same systems that

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[35] Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 87.
[36] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 52.

disempower the people. To overcome this, democracy must be reimagined as a lived experience, not an episodic event. This means developing a political culture that emphasizes deliberation, education and accountability. Deliberative democracy, as theorized by Habermas for instance, insists that political legitimacy arises not from aggregation of preferences through voting, but from rational discourse among equal participants[37]. Such a model, adapted to Nigeria's pluralistic and communal traditions, would involve strengthening local forums, town hall meetings, and civic institutions where citizens can collectively shape policies that affect their lives.

This idea aligns with Clause Ake's recommendation on the four features of the type of democracy that Africa needs. Ake in his seminal work *Democracy and Development in Africa* argues that Africa requires a radically different model of democracy, one rooted in local realities, participatory governance, and social justice, rather than on imposed Western liberal forms. He outlines four key features of the kind of democracy Africa truly needs. Firstly, democracy as a means to development – Ake argues that democracy in Africa should not be pursued as an end in itself, but as a means to achieving social and economic development[38]. It must be grounded in the lived experiences and developmental needs of the people. Secondly, participation must be broad-based and meaningful. Ake stresses the need for genuine, widespread participation not just elite or symbolic inclusion. Democracy must empower ordinary citizens to influence decisions that affect their lives beyond the ballot box[39].

Thirdly, democracy must be oriented to social justice. For democracy to be relevant and sustainable in Africa, it must focus on addressing inequality and injustice. In other words, political power must be used to correct historical and structural imbalances in society. Finally, democracy must evolve from African cultures and institutions. Ake argues against the transplantation of Western democratic models. Instead, democracy in Africa must grow organically from indigenous political traditions, values, and institutions, such as consensus-building, communalism, and moral authority. According to Ake, "The democracy Africa needs must be profoundly participatory and oriented to concrete problems of material well-being and social justice. It must not be alien and imposed, but indigenous and inclusive"[40].

Likewise, there must be a restructuring of political priorities to focus on social justice. The delivery of basic services such as housing, water, healthcare, and employment should not be seen as post-colonial benefits but as foundational democratic rights. These are not charity, they are conditions of freedom. As Nussbaum argues, democracy must be rooted in the recognition of

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[37] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 304.
[38] Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa*, 132-135.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.

every person as an end in themselves, not as a means to political power[41]. The challenge then, is to build institutions that treat people not merely as voters, but as citizens capable of critical thought, autonomous judgement, and collective action.

Education is also critical to this reimagining. In a society where political illiteracy is high, democracy becomes especially vulnerable to demagoguery, ethnic chauvinism, and religious manipulation. Civic education must be embedded in school curricula, public discourse, and community life not simply as a tool for voting correctly, but as a means of cultivating critical consciousness. Drawing on Paulo Freire, political education must awaken individuals to their socio-political realities and empower them to transform those realities. It is only through such an awakening, that democracy can become transformative rather than transactional.[42]

Furthermore, democratic reform must involve a reconfiguration of institutional accountability. Nigeria's political institutions such as the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), the Judiciary, and the Anti-Corruption agencies must be consolidated not only to function impartially, but to command public trust. This trust cannot be legislated; it must be earned through transparency, responsiveness, and a track record of protecting the public good. Without such reforms, elections will continue to be manipulated and participation will remain cynical or coerced.

Finally, democracy must be meaningful by cultivating a public ethic rooted in solidarity, justice and shared responsibility. In contrast to the prevailing culture of individualism and elite accumulation, a reimagined democracy would seek to restore the communal values of African political thought. As Wiredu emphasized, African systems traditionally valued consensus, elder deliberation, and moral leadership. While not perfect, these models underlie the possibility of democracy as a moral project, not just a political one[43].

As a matter of urgency, reimagining democracy in Nigeria and other similar contexts in Africa would mean expanding it beyond ballots and periodic elections. It would require grounding democratic legitimacy in the substantive freedom of all citizens, ensuring that political participation is not only available but also meaningful, not only procedural but also substantive. Only when the people are free in the deepest sense: free from hunger, free from ignorance, exclusion and fear can democracy truly reflect the will of the people. The future of Nigerian democracy lies not in imitating the external models but in building systems that are rooted in justice, nourished by education, and driven by the everyday experiences of the people themselves.

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[41] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 56.

[42] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 79.

[43] Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 192.

VII. Conclusion

This study has examined the complex relationship between hunger, poverty, and democratic legitimacy in Nigeria, arguing that political choice becomes morally and philosophically compromised when citizens vote under conditions of deprivation. Building on insights from political philosophy, African communitarian ethics, and democratic theory, the analysis has demonstrated that liberal proceduralism alone cannot sustain democracy in societies where socioeconomic precarity undermines autonomy, participation, and trust. The critique of the Chinese meritocratic-authoritarian model used here as a comparative foil, reveals its limited applicability to the African context, particularly because its hierarchical structure contradicts African egalitarian and communal traditions and its suppression of dissent undermines the moral value of political agency. However, examining the model's selective strength (developmental focus, long-term planning, and bureaucracy-driven governance) highlights the need for a hybrid African democratic model that embraces both participation and performance.

To move beyond theoretical critique, Nigeria's democratic reform must pursue concrete, multi-level transformation that address both the structural and epistemic foundations of democratic failure. First, the economic democratization must be prioritized. Hunger compromises autonomy; thus, policies that guarantees food security, expand employment and support small-scale enterprise are necessary preconditions for meaningful political participation. Without addressing basic needs, discussions about democracy remain hollow abstractions.

Second, the study argues for deepening civic capacity through mass literacy, democratic education, and publication platforms. A democracy of hungry and uninformed citizens is easily manipulated, hence, Nigeria must institutionalize civic education at both formal and informal levels. Community forums, local town-hall systems, and digital participatory platforms can create a dialogical democratic culture that aligns with African traditions of consensus-building.

Third, institutional reforms must also target clientelism and vote-buying which create a transactional political economy that legitimizes the state and erodes trust. Strengthening campaign finance regulations, empowering electoral monitoring bodies, and enforcing party transparency are essential steps. Furthermore, social safety nets such as conditional cash transfers, unemployment insurance, and universal healthcare should be designed to reduce the endemic vulnerability that fuels vote-buying.

Fourth, the government must also address the link between political dysfunction and the issue of alternative loyalties – reflected in the underhanded support for ethnic militias, separatist movement, and other non-state actors.

Given the persistence of this issue, citizens conclude that the state lacks moral authority or distributive fairness. As such, strengthening local governments, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and recognizing groups through constitutional reforms can mitigate the rise of these parallel loyalties.

Finally, drawing on Ake's call for a people-centred democracy, Nigeria should move toward a deliberative participatory model that values accountability, inclusion, and socioeconomic justice. This would include enforcing internal party democracy, decentralizing the decision-making process, and implementing community-driven development mechanisms like participatory budgeting. Such reforms ensure that political power is not merely contested through elections but continuously shaped by citizens in everyday governance. Democracy in regions with structural poverty requires more than electoral competition; it requires a moral and structural transformation that humanizes political participation.

In conclusion, Nigeria must therefore cultivate a democracy where citizens do not choose between hunger and the ballot box, but where political agency is grounded in dignity, autonomy, and shared prosperity. This vision requires the development of a hybrid democratic model, rooted in African philosophical values, supported by economic justice, and sustained by robust participatory institutions. Without these directions of action, democratic legitimacy will remain fragile; while with them, democracy in Nigeria can evolve into a truly emancipatory project.

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