



Application of John Locke's Social Contract Theory to Democratic Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper explores John Locke's social contract theory, engaging with philosophy to analyse his political theory and Nigeria's democratic governance within Nigeria's social contract. Drawing on Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), the research highlights natural rights, consent of the governed, constitutionalism, the right of government, limited government, and the right of revolution in the context of Nigeria's polity. The research adopts a qualitative philosophical methodology based on conceptual, textual, and critical analyses of primary and secondary texts, including Locke. The paper submits that Nigeria's constitutional democracy is Lockean in that it provides for fundamental rights, institutions of representative democracy, and separation of powers. However, democracy in Nigeria has largely reversed these theoretical democratic principles. Electoral misconduct, institutional corruption, elite domination, weak and ineffective accountability frameworks, and inadequate civic engagement have been significant impediments to the social contract between the Nigerian state and citizens. In addition, the paper submits that this is, to a great extent, a philosophical problem of applying Lockean liberalism in post-colonial African states, as it attempts to argue for the absoluteness of Western democracy on the African continent. This gap is addressed in the research by African political philosophy, in particular *Ubuntu* ethics, consensus democracy, and African progressive systems of governance, among others, as presented by philosophers like Kwasi Wiredu, Mogobe Ramose, and Kwame Gyekye. The paper submits that, for Nigeria, the critical thinking of democracy and Lockean liberalism cannot be the only and all sides to the conundrum, but African notions of democracy and citizenship must be taken on board as well. This study argues that Locke's social contract theory is still relevant to the practice of democratic governance in Nigeria. This is because it provides a framework within which one can assess the validity of democracy, responsiveness, and the rule of law within a democracy. That said, one must critically tailor the theory to the history, culture, and post-colonial situations of Nigeria.

Keywords: Locke, social contract theory, democratic governance, Nigeria, consent of the governed, constitutionalism, African political philosophy, *Ubuntu*



Introduction

John Locke's Contractualism has had a deep influence in the formation of modern democratic states. He explains in the *Second Treatise of Government* that the 'right' of legitimate political authority does not derive from divinely handed authority to an individual due to purported royal lineage. Political governance is established by a majority of the populace in order to achieve, preserve, and protect the natural flow of rights. Locke stated that natural rights include life, liberty, and property (Locke 1988, pp. 87–95). This idea changed the perception of political governance and has positively affected the progress of democracy in contemporary societies. Locke's thoughts on the social contract in Nigeria hold great importance due to the continuous absence of the legitimacy of democracy in Nigeria since the country's independence. The country claims to run a democratic constitutional form of government, however, the realities of existence and governance show a huge gap between the ideals of the constitution and governance. Factors such as corruption, electoral impropriety, and ineffective and inadequate administrative and civil structures erode the trust of the citizenry.

This situation creates a void in democracy. The governance of Nigeria is aligned with Locke's idea of the social contract, which is that a government is established by the consent of the people. Critically, applying Locke's theory to Nigeria cannot be reduced to just discussing similarities between some provisions in Nigeria's Constitution and Locke's ideas. A full reconstruction must include an analysis of the historical assumptions that underlie social contract theory. Considering the historical sources of Locke's political philosophy, for example, the European liberal traditions, the emphasis placed on individual rights, the institution of private property, and the struggle against absolutism, for the most part, is likely to be misleading if applied to the case of post-colonial African states. Failing to understand African social traditions, colonial histories, and African modes of governance, might be a result of applying Locke's ideas. This criticism has been voiced by many political philosophers. Charles Mills states that classical social contract theory incorporated what he termed the "racial contract," which excluded all non-European peoples from the political sphere (Mills 1997). In the same way, the



refusal to include non-European peoples is identified by Carole Pateman, who notes that in this theoretical realm, freedom is secretly a system of social inequality and control (Pateman 1988). Prominent African philosophers like Kwasi Wiredu, Mogobe Ramose, and Kwame Gyekye are commentary to all of these in their critiques of whether the Western liberal individualism social contract framework can credibly depict African notions of community, political responsibility, and governance (Gyekye 1997; Ramose 1999; Wiredu 1980). The research questions that this work addresses are not simply whether Nigeria follows Locke's social contract. This research examines critically the positive and negative contributions of Locke's liberalism to the social contract and democratic politics in Nigeria.

This work argues that while Locke presents a basis to build an argument on the abuse of democratic political order in Nigeria based on the tests of legitimacy, accountability, and constitutionalism, African philosophies of community, collective responsibility, relational authority, and consensus are central to the African situation. The study makes two major contributions to existing scholarship. First, it presents a philosophically informed analysis of democratic governance in Nigeria by engaging directly with John Locke's texts, as opposed to relying on secondary sources. Second, it places this analysis within the context of the broader discussions in African political philosophy on the applicability and bounds of Western liberal democratic frameworks in postcolonial Africa.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to:

1. Examine the central principles of John Locke's social contract theory and their implications for democratic governance.
2. Analyse the extent to which Lockean principles are reflected in Nigeria's constitutional democracy and political institutions.
3. Critically evaluate the philosophical limitations of applying Lockean liberalism to post-colonial African states such as Nigeria.



4. Explore African philosophical perspectives and indigenous governance traditions as alternative or complementary frameworks for democratic legitimacy.
5. Assess the relevance of Locke's theory to the challenges of democratic consolidation, accountability, and political legitimacy in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study applies a qualitative philosophical methodology based primarily on conceptual and textual analyses. The methodology uses both primary and secondary materials. The primary sources include John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). As primary sources, they provide the conceptual basis for the analyses of Locke's theories on natural rights, the legitimacy of state power, constitutional government, consent, and the right of revolution. The secondary materials are primarily in political philosophy, contemporary theories of democracy, African philosophy, and political studies of Nigeria. Locke's theories are placed within the works of John Dunn (Dunn 1969), A. John Simmons, Charles Mills (Mills 1997), Carole Pateman (Pateman 1988), Claude Ake (Ake 1996), Kwasi Wiredu (Wiredu 1980), Mogobe Ramose (Ramosé 1999), and Larry Diamond (Diamond 1988), in order to situate Locke's theories of democracy within the colonial context of liberalism and democracy and postcolonial governance.

The study employs three complementary philosophical approaches.

Conceptual Analysis

This approach clarifies and critically examines major Lockean concepts such as natural rights, consent of the governed, constitutionalism, property, majority rule, and the right of revolution. Rather than merely describing these concepts, the study analyses their philosophical implications and limitations.



Critical Hermeneutics

The study interprets Locke's political philosophy within its historical context while examining its relevance to Nigerian democratic governance. This approach enables the paper to identify tensions between Lockean liberalism and postcolonial African political realities.

Comparative Philosophical Analysis

The study examines the similarities and differences between John Locke's version of the social contract and African philosophies of governance, such as *Ubuntu* ethics and consensus democracy. This comparison will help identify whether Western liberal political theory alone is sufficient to analyze the concept of democratic legitimacy in Nigeria. Thus, the method is more philosophical and normative than empirically precise. The analysis is aimed at the theoretical concepts of accountability, legitimacy, political responsibility, the social contract, and democratic power in the context of Nigeria.

Historical Foundations of Locke's Social Contract Theory

Social contract theory began to flourish during the Enlightenment era and sought to explain the foundations of a rational political authority and the legitimacy of government. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau, as the trio of the social contract, developed their theories in reaction to the political turbulence of the time, absolutism, and the developing thought on personal freedom. Among those listed, Locke's ideas were most directly applicable in the evolution of liberal constitutional democracy. Locke's significant text, the *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, rejects the Divine Right of Kings and states that political authority is the result of the consent of the individuals in the given society, as opposed to hereditary entitlement, or religious entitlement (Locke 1988, pp. 4–15). In contrast to Hobbes, who justified permanent, absolute sovereignty for the sake of political stability, Locke asserts that in the state of nature, individuals possess natural rights, and such a state exists prior to the establishment of government. He argues that, as God's creations, humans are naturally free and equal and there



is thus no legitimate justification for subjection to arbitrary domination. In contrast to Hobbes' state of nature, Locke viewed the state of nature as a people-centric society, governed by natural law and moral equality, although it did not have the proper means to enforce justice (Locke 1988, pp. 19–21). Therefore it can be said that the creation of government was the result of the need to set up political authority by consent in order to provide the necessary protection of rights and adjudication. Locke primarily was concerned with the preservation of property. In Chapter V of the *Second Treatise*, he develops his labor theory of property, arguing that individuals gain ownership when they mix their labor with natural resources (Locke 1988, pp. 27–51). For Locke, property includes one's life and liberty along with material possessions. Therefore, the role of government is to protect these rights. This understanding has greatly impacted the development of liberal constitutionalism and the modern theory of democracy. Locke insists that political authority must be understood as conditional and not absolute. The government is a fiduciary trust for the public, and those who govern and violate this trust, forfeit their legitimacy. Thus, Locke supports the right of revolution against oppressive governments. In the *Second Treatise*, he defends the right of the people to remove oppressive sovereigns who violate the rights and liberties of the people and to institute a new government (Locke 1988, pp. 222–243). Locke's political philosophy has had a considerable impact on the historical development of democracy beyond the borders of 17th century England. His ideas helped to shape the American and French Revolutions and the development of constitutional democracy, representative government, and liberal rights discourse (Ogonnaya 2023, p. 6).

However, some critics believe that Locke's theory maintained colonial and exclusionary presuppositions. For instance, Charles Mills argues that within colonial societies, the liberal social contract operated alongside racial domination (Mills 1997). In Nigeria, Locke's social contract theory is helpful because present-day political problems centre on issues relating to legitimacy, accountability, constitutionalism, and rights protection (Ezenwa 2025, p. 121). The use of Lockean liberalism in Nigeria has some problems because Nigeria's political evolution is not just a product of liberal constitutional thinking but also of colonialism, ethnic pluralism, military dictatorship, and communal governance traditions. Therefore, the subsequent



section identifies the core elements of Locke's political ideas and analyzes their ramifications for democracy in Nigeria.

Core Principles of Lockean Political Philosophy and Their Democratic Implications

One of the central teachings of Locke's political philosophy is the doctrine of natural rights. Locke argues that every individual has rights to their life, freedoms, and their possessions, independent of any governing rule (Locke 1988, p. 87) and that no government provides these rights, but rather protects them. It serves as the foundational claim of modern constitutional democracy, as it sets boundaries to the scope of state power and recognizes the individual's moral rights over the state. This doctrine has far-reaching effects regarding the nature of democracy. A democratic government is only legitimate when its primary function is the protection of its citizen's rights and wellbeing. In the Nigerian context, however, cascading levels of insecurity, the abuse of human rights, and the corruption of state institutions consistently undermine the protection of these rights (Ogbuka et al. 2024, p. 111).

Therefore, when the institutions that are meant to secure citizens and their rights instead foster insecurity, the state's philosophical legitimacy is called into question. The consent of the governed is another important principle of Lockean philosophy. Locke also dismisses the idea that rulers are entitled to rule because of the law of God, or because they have been born into a ruling family. Rather, Locke believes that the creation of a state is only through the voluntary act of rational individuals who agree to leave their state of nature and join together to ensure one another's continued existence (Locke 1988, pp. 95–99). The principle of popular consent is a key component to modern democracy, as justification for elections, representation, and the rule of law is derived from it. The reasoning behind the idea of consent in most democratic societies is multifaceted and far from being logical. In Locke's theory, the rationale behind the structure of the government assumes that individuals are capable of providing rational consent to the theory. However, many argue that good faith consent is impossible in the absence of



fundamental social justice. For instance, Pateman claims that, in the presence of the unequal power structures, classical contract theory gives the impression of the existence of relations of equality in the presence of freedom and consent, and conceals the inequalities in the relations of power (Pateman 1988). Likewise, in Nigeria, the supposed sacredness that elections bring to democracy is attacked by electoral malpractice, politically motivated violence, vote buying, and the monopoly of the political class (Peter 2025, p. 7) leaving us with consent that is more procedural than substantive. The other contribution that Locke made to the theory of democracy is his belief in limited government. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke argues that the law must restrain government's power as boundless power will always tend to destroy liberty (Locke 1988, pp. 131–142). Thus, institutional structures are fiduciary, not absolute, with the government as the power trustee of the citizens' interests. The government's legitimate power will be lost should it abuse its power.

Because this principle was the basis for the establishment of the separation of powers and the principles of constitutionalism, it helped to shape Nigeria's constitution. It has also established the executive, legislative, and judicial arms of government to check the concentration of power. However, the imbalance of power between the three arms of government ultimately renders the constitutional checks and balances impotent (Adenuga & Akingbulu 2024, p. 13). The failure to restrain the government's power has led to a breakdown of the judiciary, executive disorder, and political patronage. From Locke's point of view, the result is not the loss of politically legitimate order, but a breach of the moral order of political legitimacy. Locke's argument for the validity of majority rule has had an important influence on the establishment of democratic orders. For Locke, once individuals agree to define themselves as a political society, the decisions of that society must derive from the will of the majority, for the unanimous consent of a polity to every single political question is never possible (Locke 1988, p. 96). Consequently, majority rule becomes a necessary construct for maintaining the order of a political society that is free. Nonetheless, this principle invites serious philosophical challenges in plural societies such as Nigeria. Majoritarian democracy may result in exclusion or oppression, when ethnic, regional or religious minorities perceive themselves as politically sidelined. Prominent



African political philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu are critical of adversarial majoritarian democracy for fostering divisions as opposed to a spirit of community. Rather, Wiredu is an advocate for consensus democracy and suggests that such a democracy has a firm basis in the indigenous political traditions of Africa (Wiredu 1980). This line of argument suggests the necessity of considering the liberal democracy of Locke in the context of pluralistic societies of Africa. Another key component of Locke's political thought is the right of revolution. In Locke's opinion, a government that repeatedly violates the rights of people and acts in direct opposition to the duties vested upon it by the people, gives the people the right to revolt and end such a government (Locke 1988, pp. 222–243).

Locke is certainly not an advocate of indiscriminate rebellion. In fact, he proposes that when a government intentionally dismantles the framework of governance to which it is obligated, the people then have the right to revolt. Protests in Nigeria against corruption, insecurity, and brutality, especially the #EndSARS protests, can be analyzed through a certain Lockean lens. These movements believe that the government has failed and is not following through on its commitments to the people. Still, the Nigerian government often takes repressive measures to deal with protests instead of finding a solution through democracy. This conflict shows a disparity between what is legally allowed in a constitutionally bound democracy versus the actual political practices which are authoritarian in nature. Locke's political theorizing places much confidence in a rational and morally responsible citizenry. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke prioritizes reason and the education and morality of people in society (Locke 1997). Institutions, in and of themselves, are a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy, as are civic virtue and political involvement. This is especially true in Nigeria, where political apathy, low levels of education, poverty, and patron-client politics dilute democracy. A healthy democracy is not possible if large swathes of society are politically alienated and treated like pawns in the elite's struggles for power. Locke's political theorizing, therefore, the norms surrounding democratic governance, which make the link between legitimacy and accountability, and rights protection, is important for post-colonial Africa, although the limits of this perspective remain contested. The next section will look at how indigenous African



philosophies and traditional governance systems can either support or contradict Locke's theorizing.

African Philosophy and Indigenous Governance Traditions

One of the drawbacks to applying Lockean social contract theory to Nigeria is that it often considers Western liberal individualism as the bedrock of political legitimacy. African political philosophy offers conceptual frameworks of personhood, communities, and governance that diverge from classical liberalism. Accordingly, philosophical discourse on the practice of democratic governance in Nigeria should consider indigenous African philosophies and not assume Lockean liberalism is the only theory. Witness the many variations of African political philosophy that demonstrate the importance of communalism, relational identity, and shared moral accountability as opposed to Locke's individualism. *Ubuntu* underscores the moral character of interconnectedness and social, political, and moral obligations that are not contractual, but rather arise from the communal intermingling of human beings. Scholar advocates of *Ubuntu*, like Mogobe Ramose, posit that African political philosophies reject radical individualism, privileging the sustenance of communalism, social cohesion and the totality of peace and happiness (Ramose 1999). From this perspective, political legitimacy does not rest on the social contract, but rather the existence of structures geared towards the sustenance of communal ties and the provision of social justice. This is in stark contrast to Locke's assertion that communal persistence is dictated by the individual's rights and the protection of private property. Kwame Gyekye's moderate communitarianism sees both individual rights and responsibilities to community. He critiques extreme individualism, just as he critiques all forms of authoritarian collectivism. His position accounts for the philosophical divide that exists between liberal democracy and African communalism especially in the Nigerian context, espousing that democratic governance should protect individual rights and also promote social solidarity and a sense of collective responsibility (Gyekye 1997).

This critique is further developed by Kwasi Wiredu through his concept of consensus democracy. He argues that many pre-colonial African societies relied on building consensus



through assemblies and not on competitive, adversarial majority voting. He argues that consensus democracy decreases the alienation that is prevalent in modern democracies, because it is oriented around the need for consensus and not domination (Wiredu 1980). This is in stark contrast to the modern electoral politics in Nigeria, which is an extreme of the winner takes all democratic systems, and where elections are instruments that deepen the divisions of society along ethnic and regional lines. The palaver also talks about and promotes the spirit of dialogue, and active participation of the community in the making of governance decisions. In many of the traditional African governance systems, extensive public discourse was the primary source of authority and order, and not the rigid application of laws. This stands in stark contrast to the imprecise systems of democracy, which are characterized by periodic elections. Indigenous Nigerian governance systems reflected participatory political practices and community based governance systems. These included councils of elders and communal negotiations and were based on kin and community wellbeing. These arrangements, however, had their challenges, and indicate that Africa's democratic participation was not a colonial importation. The colonial architecture imposed a centralised system of administration with an authoritarian bureaucratic structure which the Nigerian state inherited at independence. This structure was in direct conflict with the structures of communal democracy, which were the mainstay of the indigenous Nigerian political systems. The Nigerian scenario presents a challenge to the Lockean social contract as a democratic foundation. Lockean theory assumes an autonomous individual, rationally consenting to the formation of a political society. We, however, find in African political philosophy a conception of political identity in relational and communal terms. The issue is, therefore, that Nigeria might not conform to the Lockean social contract, but does African democracy require a different philosophy? In African philosophy, Lockean theory is not totally dispensable. However, a more constructive approach appears to be a philosophical grafting. In this regard, democracy entails a code of political conduct, a set of rights, and limitations of power. These are of primary importance; however, a democracy must also provide for African structures of unified endeavor, social obligation, and participatory consensus. The idea of democracy in Nigeria should focus on the convergence and not the divergence of liberalism



and the African political philosophy in the Nigerian context.

Democratic Development in Nigeria: From Colonial Rule to the Fourth Republic

In Nigeria, the legacy of colonialism, military rule, pluralism, the variety of political and legal systems, and other factors have combined to influence the rise and fall of democratic governance. To appreciate the impact of all these factors on democracy, we need to evaluate the importance of Locke's social contract theory in the context of Nigeria. British colonial administration provided very limited forms of representative governance. Because of the lack of democratic practices, the administrative reforms that they implemented have been described as a means of indirect colonial administration. The result of these practices influenced the outcome of colonial constitution arrangements. In terms of democracy, Locke stated that the outcomes of situations should be formed and shaped by the people. The outcomes, however, were imposed upon them. In 1960, Nigeria gained independence, and the parliamentary system was documented without the British Westminster Structure. Within a short period, the First Republic was characterized by ethnic and intra-regional rivalry, as well as an unstable institutional structure, and was brought to an end by a military coup in 1966. This demonstrated the end of Nigeria's first democratic experiment and the beginning of a more authoritarian military rule.

According to Locke, the essence of military rule is the denial of the right to rule, which is to provide governance to the people within the existing social contract. The military spends government resources without the authority of the governed. Latin American and Western European states, in the development of their democracies, have cited Nigeria as an example of how deep military rule negatively affects trust in government. The Second Republic, instituted in 1979, sought to restore constitutional democracy with a presidential system modeled on the US. Corruption and poor governance led to yet another military coup in 1983 (Ogonnaya 2023, p. 7). Authoritarian rule continued to be a dominant feature of the Nigerian state, and military rule undermined democracy, illustrating a very unstable political and democratic environment.



The annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election is one of the most consequential events in Nigeria's democratic history. It is the election most praised as being the most free and fair in all of Nigeria's election history. Having it annulled could be described as democracy's most extreme absence with respect to the consent of the governed, in that it deprived the governed of their civil authority to choose their rulers. Philosophically, it marked the dissolution of the social contract between the citizens and the state. The transition to civilian rule of 1999 marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic, and the longest period of uninterrupted democracy in Nigeria. The 1999 Constitution honours fundamental rights, representative government, judicial independence, and federalism. These elements are all indicative of several elements of Lockean democracy. While there are many elements of democracy in the Constitution, there are still significant issues with respect to democracy in Nigeria. This is especially true when considering the issues with elections, as many of the malpractices and evils that have plagued Nigeria continue to undermine democracy. Vote buying, election violence, and many of the acts of intimidation and harassment that occur, erode the principle of consent that electoral systems are supposed to establish, and therefore foster, in the governed. In these cases, the appearance of democracy is all that is left, where the semblance of democracy, and its many systems, have become mere acts for the sake of participation, rather than democracy itself.

Corruption is perhaps the greatest hindrance that affects democracy in Nigeria. In the systems of democracy, especially the government, the public good has to be the end. Anything to the contrary erodes the legitimacy of the system. Corruption, therefore, is an administrative breakdown, but is equally a breakdown of the founding principles of democracy. Civil society organizations, reporters, unions, and activist movements have all played a part in upholding the principles of democratic accountability in Nigeria. The numerous campaigns in Nigeria's civil society, the demand for electoral reforms, the upholding of human rights, and the demand for greater transparency and accountability in government, illustrate the persistent need and desire by the public to participate in the democratic process (Njoku 2024, p. 18). These movements reflect Locke's proposition of the citizenry's entitlement and obligation to defy oppressive agents in government. The Nigerian federal system also raises important philosophical questions con-



cerning decentralisation and political participation. Locke favours limited government and the diffusion of political authority to prevent tyranny. However, critics argue that Nigeria's federalism remains excessively centralised because state and local governments depend heavily on federal allocations and political control (Otinche 2023, p. 44). Such concentration of power weakens local democratic participation and undermines accountability. Ultimately, Nigeria's democratic development reveals a persistent tension between constitutional ideals and political realities. While the Nigerian state formally reflects several Lockean democratic principles, institutional weakness, corruption, and authoritarian political culture continue to obstruct the substantive realisation of democratic legitimacy.

Locke's Social Contract Theory and the Nigerian Constitution

The principles of Locke's political philosophy can be seen in several parts of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, including aspects of participation, the contextual framework of government of Nigeria, the separation of and the protection of individual rights along with the Constitution of Nigeria. The preamble of the Nigerian Constitution, like Locke, insists that the rightful source of political power is the people, in contrast to the alleged divine right of kings or the right of succession. In the protection of individual rights, there is a significant similarity between Locke and the Nigerian Constitution. Chapter IV of the Constitution says that everyone has the right to life, the right to dignity, the right to personal liberty, the right to a fair hearing, the right to freedom of expression and association and the right to acquire and own property. These protections in the Constitution can be said to be in accordance with the natural rights of individuals as Locke explains in his *Second Treatise of Government* (Locke 1988, p. 87). The preservation of the life and the protection of the liberties and the properties of the people in society is government's primary duty. The mere existence of protections in the Constitution has, however, over the years, failed to guarantee the protection of rights in practice. The Nigeria Police has a history of violence and gross violations of human rights, including extrajudicial killings and other forms of general insecurity. These are clear evidence of the failure of the Constitution and democratic rule in Nigeria (Ezenwa 2025, p. 124). Ac-



According to Locke, democracy is not just the existence of a Constitution. The preservation of a people's rights is also a key marker of the democracy. A country has, in effect, lost sovereignty if it creates structures it does not maintain. Another example of the alignment between Locke's theory and the Nigerian Constitution would be the separation of powers. According to Locke, the separation of powers is essential to protect against tyranny and arbitrary rule (Locke 1988, pp. 143–144). The Nigerian Constitution incorporates a three-branch system of government to achieve the desired effects of the system: executive, legislative, and judicial. There are, however, practical challenges to the separation of powers in Nigeria's Constitution. The executive branch has the most power, and the balance in the other two branches is disrupted due to the politicization of the judiciary and the subordination of the legislature to the executive (Adenuga & Akingbulu 2024, p. 14).

As a result, the Constitution is more of a formal than a substantive document. According to Locke, the institutional framework of a Constitution is sufficient to contain the powers of the Constitution. The Nigerian case, however, illustrates the insufficiency of a Constitution, as democratic governance will remain elusive until the political will and the system of governance is integrated. The issue of property rights shows the discrepancy between Locke's philosophy and current Nigerian law. Locke's view states that individuals own property in virtue of their productive capacities, and the government is to protect this property (Locke 1988, pp. 27–51). In Nigeria, this is in direct contradiction to the Land Use Act of 1978, which puts all land in the country under the full control of the state. While this law was intended to promote equity in access to land and simplify the administration of land, many have criticized it for undermining the right to private property, and for giving the government the means to engage in arbitrary land distribution. This points to the more fundamental conflict between liberal individualism and the centralisation of postcolonial states. While Locke places liberty on the individual right to own property, most postcolonial African states, responding to the exploitative nature of colonialism and their subsequent underdevelopment, placed centralised control over the economy. The Nigerian constitutional order combines both liberal and statist elements. Also, Locke's understanding of government as a fiduciary trust means that the government has



to answer to the people. He views political power as a trust that can be withdrawn if abused. In Nigeria, however, the reality is the opposite, as the withdrawal of trust now works against the people. Electoral rigging, elite patronage, and corruption institutionalised within the state and society make it hard for people to punish political leaders for misconduct (Asogwa & Nnamchi 2023, p. 6).

The Nigerian constitution enshrines the principles of democracy in the formation of representative bodies and the holding of regular elections. However, the real participation of the people in democracy has been made much more difficult due to poverty, political violence, and the unequal distribution of political power. Locke's view is that the people have a certain degree of personal freedom and the rational capacity to engage in governance. In cases of extreme poverty, inequality and political patronage, however, the necessary economic conditions for a democracy of consent are totally missing. A further major point of comparison is Locke's conception of tolerance and the extent of political dissent permitted. In his *Letter Concerning Toleration* Locke argues for a right of individuals to religious and rational (intellectual) discourse, which he sees as a necessary component of civil society (Locke 1983). In a democracy, tolerance and the right to dissent must be guaranteed. While the Nigerian constitution provides for the right to express one's views, the right to protest and civil society activism is met with state violence, intimidation, and civil law restrictions (Njoku 2024, p. 18). These anomalies infringe the liberal principles of democratic constitutionalism. Locke's theory on the right of revolution also has a place in modern theory of the bounds of a constitution. When a government ruins the foundations of a constitution and abuses its trust, Locke believed that the people of a nation have the right on moral grounds to dispose of such government (Locke 1988, pp. 222–243). Most modern-day constitutional democracies will have gone beyond revolutionary politics and in its place put mechanisms of institutional reform. An ongoing and continuous failure of government can lead to widespread discontent and create suffering among the populace. From a formalistic viewpoint, several Lockean ideas have been integrated into the Nigerian Constitution at the formal level. However, the gap that exists between the ideals incorporated in the constitution and those in actual governance reveals much deeper and more complex issues that



are structural and philosophical in nature. Democratic legitimacy can never be fully attained only with a constitution.

It is vital that the institutions of a country give substance and form to the ideals of democracy, governance, justice, public participation, and the protection of fundamental rights. At the end of the day, the linkage between Locke's social contract and the Nigerian Constitution shows us the importance of philosophical ideas, but with a great deal of practical limitations. While some aspects of Lockean ideas are very important in the Nigerian scenario in terms of assessing governance, we also come to understand that in order to create a system of constitutional democracy, we need to have a suitable institutional framework and also a suitable environment in terms of the political and social setup, and historical background of the country.

Consent of the Governed in Theory and Practice in Nigeria

In Locke's political philosophy, the consent of the governed is of utmost importance. He argues that for political power to be legitimate, people must willingly agree for a governing body to be formed which will defend their natural rights (Locke 1988, pp. 95–99). Consent, therefore, is the basis of political obligation and democracy. In theory, Nigeria's democratic structure reflects this principle. The Constitution recognizes sovereignty as belonging to the people, and elections are designed to provide the populace with the opportunity to influence the political leadership and engage in the act of governance. The popular will is shown in the constitutional order through the presence of various democratic structures such as political parties, legislatures, courts, and civil society. In practice, however, Nigerian democracy tends to negate the real meaning of consent. Elections, which ought to be the means through which the collective will of the people is expressed, are characterized by a number of undemocratic vices, such as an indifferent attitude toward the electorate, the buying and trade of votes, intimidation and violence, manipulation of ballots, and the blatant misuse of government resources (Ogbuka et al. 2024, p. 110). In such situations, the results of the electoral process reflect economic coercion, political despair, or elite rule, rather than democratic selection.

This contradiction explains one significant philosophical imperative of democracy. Locke's



theory presumes that people have the capacity for free, rational, and independent political judgment. However, the realities of poverty, inequality, and the patronage system that influences the politics of democracy distorts the fabric and nature of democracy. Hence, consent given under such conditions, characterized as structural dependency, can only be viewed as legitimate to a limited extent. Voter apathy adds to the challenges of democratic consent in Nigeria. Citizens are losing faith in political institutions, and many view elections as an inadequate means of enacting political change. Low voter turnout erodes democracy because it demonstrates a disconnect between the citizens and the state. Declining electoral turnout weakens political democracy because it erodes the legitimacy of democracy (Peter 2025, p. 7). A democratic framework cannot strengthen permission from its citizens when substantial sections of the populace withdraw from the democratic process altogether. The connection between citizens and state structures also communicates an unresolvable gap between democracy's promise and reality. For Locke, the purpose of the state is the common good, where the political authorities' moral obligation is to the people. In Nigeria, the state of governance is far removed from the welfare of the people. Corruption, the misallocation of resources, and the inequitable distribution of resources have caused the people to lose faith in the political system (Asogwa & Nnamchi 2023, p. 4).

Using the Locke definition, corrosion is not bureaucratic inefficiency, but a violation of the social contract. When public officials use public office as a mechanism for personal enrichment, they negate the trust and confidence that justify their authority. The erosion of trust and confidence in the state of corruption becomes a barrier to the democratic process. Another issue is that political institutions are unresponsive to the needs and demands of the people. In order for democracy to function properly, the relationship between the government and the people needs to be a two-way street, and regular elections can't be the only time that contact occurs. Nigerian governance is characterized by a lack of public participation during the most critical phases of decision making. The process of policy generation in Nigeria is dominated by elite negotiations instead of deliberative participation. Responses to civic protest movements clearly demonstrate a few of these problems. The #EndSARS protests signified serious public



frustration with the police, the level of youth unemployment, and state violence. One way of philosophically interpreting such movements is through Locke's theory of resistance because, in such cases, protesters require the recognition of accountability to the institutions that are seen as acting against the interests and rights of the citizens. However, generally, the response of the state to such protest movements is repressive, and the strategy is not one of democratic engagement. The response of the state to the protective interventions of the police to limit demonstrations and the violent repression of protests is a contraction of democratic participation and of Locke's rationale for political liberty. Such a state response reveals the weakness in the constitutional democracy and the struggle for an authoritarian political culture. The structure of Nigerian federalism also adds a layer of complexity when considering the question of consent. Federalism is meant to augment decentralization and local participation. However, a concentration of political and economic power at the center is the reality (Otinche 2023, p. 44).

Most state and local governments rely on the Federal Government for funds, which in the end results in little genuine local autonomy. It also means that citizens of those local governments are politically alienated from the decision making processes. Internal party politics also leaves much to be desired in terms of democratic representation. Elite patronage networks, a lack of distinct party ideologies, and candidate imposition dismantle the competition at the polls. This means that elections function as an elite means of establishing a new political order, rather than as a means of expressing the democratic consent of the electorate. In spite of these obstacles, Nigeria's democracy is yet to die. The civil society organizations, independent media, youth movements, labor unions, and rights advocates are vital in defending democratic processes. The continued activities of these stakeholders demonstrate the presence of a democratic consciousness that becomes dormant in other areas of society. In the area of civics, this democratic consciousness is a form of moral agency within political society as described by Locke. Ultimately, the Nigerian experience exposes a large discrepancy between the theoretical framework for democratic consent and the practical political world. Though Nigerian constitutional democracy reflects certain aspects of Lockean democracy, structural inequality, corruption, and weak institutions, combined with authoritarianism, continue to erode the legit-



imacy of Nigeria's substantive democracy. Thus, the applicability of Locke to Nigeria is not because of full representation of his ideals, but rather, Nigeria is an exemplar for the assessment of democracy where Locke provides a critical normative framework for the democracy.

Philosophical Reflections and Recommendations

The preceding analysis indicates that Locke's social contract theory has philosophical pertinence for democratic governance in Nigeria because it creates criteria for assessing legitimacy, accountability, constitutionalism, and rights protection. Nevertheless, the analysis identifies significant constraints regarding the application of Lockean liberalism to postcolonial African states. One important philosophical insight that can be derived from this analysis is that constitutional democracy is unsustainable in post-colonial societies like Nigeria, even with the best possible institutional frameworks and arrangements, as well as the holding of periodic democratic elections. For Locke, political authority is justified by the relationship of mutual trust that exists between the citizens and the government. When corruption, repression, and inequality prevail in political community life, the formal structures of democracy and the constitutional order begin to lose legitimacy. For Nigeria, this means that the democratic renewal process must extend beyond merely structural, administrative changes. This involves a reconstruction of political morality and civic responsibility where political leaders begin to see public office as a social trust, as opposed to a means of personal wealth. Likewise, citizens need to shed their political apathy and become democratic actors and accountability advocates. The analysis also indicates that, in Nigeria, democratic legitimacy is unattainable if African realities continue to be disregarded in liberalism. Rights, constitutionalism, and the limitation of the power of the state, as espoused by Locke, are important, but these must be couched within the African communalism, which prioritizes solidarity and interdependence. A more adequate philosophical democratic model suitable for Nigeria requires liberal constitutionalism-African communitarian synthesis. This preserves individual rights alongside greater social and civic responsibility. Therefore, rather than see democracy as electoral competition, it should be perceived as the ethical matrix of the relationship between the state and society. For affirmation of democracy



no less than commitment to its practice is required. This means, democracy is at stake when poverty, illiteracy, and insecurity are high. Structurally, social inequalities weaken political autonomy and reduce democracy to a mere formality.

Effective citizenship is a precondition for the social and economic framework that democracy requires. Legitimate democracy has the potential to emerge from these sufficient conditions. This study contends that institutional and political culture (integrity included) are required to abate authoritarianism in a democracy that is based on the will of the people (constitutionalist). Without the protections of the judiciary and civil rights along with the freedom to express and protect opposition the state will become a prisoner of its own rules. The citizens of a state should always be empowered to freely speak against a political system lest accountability becomes a farce. This study advocates for holistic African political philosophy and democratic theory. African indigenous governance has the potential for rethinking democracy in African communities. Measuring African states against liberal democracy should be a critical thinking exercise.

Conclusion

Indeed, John Locke's social contract theory is pivotal to modern democracy, as it ties political legitimacy to consent, constitutionalism, accountability, and the safeguarding of natural rights. This study has identified that numerous elements of Nigeria's constitutional democracy incorporate important Lockean principles, particularly representative government, the separation of powers, and the right to fundamental freedoms. Nonetheless, this study identified that Nigeria's political reality does not meet the standards of its constitutional design. Executive dominance, malfeasance, and corruption, coupled with institutional and systemic weaknesses, insecurity, and the inadequate application of civic rights and democracy, have thwarted progress toward the realization of the democracy paradox. A Lockean reading of the democratic paradox reveals that failing to safeguard citizens' rights and welfare erodes the very legitimacy that democracy depends on. This study has also attempted to address the application of Lockean social contract theory to Nigeria, presenting further philosophical arguments to the question of the universality



of Western political theory. Locke's theory was premised on a particular European historical context of liberal individualism and resistance to absolutism.

Nigeria, as a post-colonial African country, has a vastly different historical experience and community politics that cannot adequately be described using contractarian models. This study, therefore, has borrowed from African political philosophy, particularly the *Ubuntu* ethics, consensus democracy, and communitarianism of K. Wiredu, M. Ramose, and K. Gyekye, among others (Gyekye 1997; Ramose 1999; Wiredu 1980). These views have emphasized that in African societies, the political legitimacy of democracy may rest not only on personal consent, but rather on the cooperative consensus of the community and the integrated societal welfare. In a critique of Western liberalism, Locke's relevance to democracy in Nigeria goes beyond transplanting Western liberalism. Locke's theory continues to provide important normative standards for the evaluation of the political order, rules of constitution, and the accountability of the state. But, the Postcolonial, cultural, and historical realities of the Nigerian state must also be considered in the democratic governance of Nigeria by incorporating other Philosophies of Africa. Democratic consolidation in Nigeria is not only about electoral or constitutional reforms. Justice, accountability, and a sense of civic duty and political participation are the cornerstones of the new political culture that must be emerged. Only by the change of philosophies and institutions will the social order of the state and the people be transformed to resemble Democracy, in the Lockean and African political thought traditions.

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