



Public Administration and the Political Economy of Nigeria: A Political Analysis

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Abstract

Public administration is not only the machinery for implementing state policies but also a reflection of the broader political economy within which it operates. Its capacity to drive socio-economic development depends largely on the quality of governance and the structural dynamics of the state. Thus, understanding the relationship between public administration and political economy is necessary to explain the successes and limitations of administrative reforms in Nigeria and beyond. This review critically examines the interplay between public administration and the political economy of Nigeria. It highlights how governance structures, political processes, and economic systems interact to shape administrative effectiveness, drawing from the contexts of developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries for comparative insights. Key issues discussed include impact of federal character and revenue allocation, federalism and intergovernmental relations, and prebendal pressures in bureaucratic practice well as the corruption, weak institutions, patronage politics, and resource mismanagement. The article also draws on historical antecedents, contemporary trends, and selected case studies in administrative reform and political economy. The analysis emphasizes that overcoming these challenges requires reforms in both administrative systems and economic policies. Strengthening governance structures and supporting public administration with sustainable economic strategies are essential to achieving long-term national development.

Keywords: Public Administration, Political Economy, Governance, Nigeria, Development, History

Introduction

Public administration is the principal mechanism through which governments translate political mandates into tangible services, regulatory frameworks, and social order. In Nigeria, the relationship between public administration and the broader political economy is complex, shaped by historical legacies, resource dependence, constitutional design, and sociopolitical dynamics. As a developing federal state with a rentier revenue structure, Nigeria's administrative systems operate in an environment where political incentives and economic realities heavily influence bureaucratic behavior (Ake, 1981; Joseph, 1987).

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the conceptual foundations of public administration, the nature of Nigeria's political economy, and the implications of their interaction for governance outcomes. It also integrates theoretical perspectives

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

Public Administration

Public administration denotes both the application and the study of the principles of administration within a political setting. It involves the harnessing and utilization of human, financial, and material resources to implement government policies and programmes aimed at achieving specified objectives, such as national development (Remigius et al., 2025). Public administration takes place across a variety of institutional settings: public or private including universities, prisons, churches, the army, courts of justice, remand homes, business centres, and rehabilitation facilities. According to Ndukwe et al. (2023), the importance of public administration derives from its central concern with the well-being of the people. Consequently, different reform approaches have been initiated over time to improve the quality of public service delivery. Ighodalo (2018) further stresses that public administration is a major driver of socio-economic and political development in any

country. Indeed, nations desirous of genuine development invest enormous human and material resources in their public administration systems in order to enhance citizen welfare and well-being. From a classical perspective, Pfiffner and Presthus (1960, cited in Mohammed, 2024) define public administration as the process of “getting the work of government done by coordinating the efforts of people.” This definition underscores its dual character as both theory and practice, an amorphous but comprehensive field of inquiry aimed at promoting superior understanding of government and its relationship with society. Its main objective remains the advancement of management and policies so that government can function effectively. Building on this foundation, Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) identify three broad phases in the evolution of public administration:

1. The Classical Period, which emphasized a strict politics–administration dichotomy (Wilson, 1887).
2. The New Public Management (NPM) phase, which introduced market-based principles, efficiency metrics, and business-like practices into public service.
3. The New Public Service (NPS) model, which prioritizes democratic governance, transparency, and citizen participation.

Nigeria’s administrative practice reflects a hybrid of these models. While modern reforms are formally adopted, their full implementation is often constrained by entrenched political economy dynamics, such as patronage systems, rent-seeking, and weak institutional accountability.

Brief History of Public Administration in Nigeria

From the colonial civil service to post-independence reforms, Nigeria’s public administration has originated with mixed outcomes. Initially designed as an instrument of colonial control, it later became a mechanism for state-building. Despite reforms, persistent issues such as over-centralization, lack of accountability, corruption, and ethnic politics continue to undermine administrative efficiency (Ayoade, 1988; Gboyega, 1992).

Public administration in Nigeria can be broadly understood through three historical phases: the pre-colonial era, the colonial period, and the post-independence era. Each stage reflects a blend of indigenous traditions, British colonial legacies, and subsequent reforms shaped by political regimes (Adamolekun, 2002).

Pre-Colonial Era (Before 1900)

Indigenous Systems: Diverse ethnic groups had sophisticated systems of administration rooted in culture and tradition.

The Hausa/Fulani in the North operated monarchical systems with centralized taxation and authority.

The Yoruba in the West blended monarchy with participatory democratic practices.

The Igbo in the East relied on decentralized governance through elder councils (Ekeh, 1975).

Characteristics: These systems were largely decentralized, community-based, and relied on customary rulers and councils for decision-making.

Colonial Period (1900–1960)

Indirect Rule: The British governed through traditional rulers, reinforcing existing power structures (Crowder, 1964).

Colonial Superstructure: A hierarchical civil service was introduced at the central level, creating a dual system of indirect rule and bureaucratic administration.

Nigerianization: By the late 1940s, steps were taken to gradually transfer administrative responsibilities to Nigerians (Famoriyo, 1984).

Local Government Reforms: In response to nationalist criticism, reforms in the late 1940s and early 1950s aimed at modernizing local governance and reducing the excesses of indirect rule (Adebayo, 1981).

Post-Independence Era (1960–Present)

Colonial Legacy: Nigeria inherited the British administrative framework at independence in 1960 (Adamolekun, 1985).

Reforms and Restructuring: Successive governments—both military and civilian—undertook reforms to modernize the civil service and restructure local government.

Independence Era (1960–1966): Early efforts focused on consolidating administrative institutions (Ayoade, 1988).

Military Rule (1966–1999): Characterized by frequent restructuring, centralization of authority, and inconsistent reform outcomes (Gboyega, 1992).

Democratization (1999–Present): The Fourth Republic introduced reforms under successive administrations to enhance efficiency, reduce corruption, and professionalize the civil service (Olaopa, 2014).

Contemporary Challenges: Despite these efforts, Nigeria’s public administration continues to grapple with inefficiency, weak institutional capacity, corruption, and the need for genuine decentralization to empower local governments (Suberu, 2001).

Political Economy

Political economy refers to the interrelationship between political processes and economic systems, particularly how political institutions influence

economic outcomes and vice versa (North, 1990). For Nigeria, two frameworks are especially relevant:

Rentier State Theory: As Ake (1981) and Beblawi & Luciani (1987) explain, rentier states derive a significant share of revenues from external rents such as oil exports. This structure reduces the fiscal need to tax citizens, thereby weakening accountability mechanisms.

Prebendalism: Joseph (1987) describes Nigeria's political culture as prebendal, where public offices are treated as entitlements to be exploited for personal and group benefit, distributing state resources among clients, kin, and constituents.

Rentier State Syndrome: Nigeria's economy is overwhelmingly dependent on oil revenues, which account for over 80% of government revenue and over 90% of export earnings (CBN, 2023). This dependency has created a rentier state model where economic productivity is sidelined in favor of distributing oil rents through political channels. According to Mahdavy (1970), rentier states tend to develop weak institutions because the ruling elite rely on external rents rather than taxation, thus weakening the accountability relationship between the state and its citizens.

Elite Dominance and Political Patronage: Political elites in Nigeria often capture public institutions for personal or group interests. Public administration is heavily influenced by patronage networks, whereby appointments and promotions are based on loyalty rather than competence (Agbaje, 1999). This practice undermines institutional efficiency and creates an environment where corruption thrives.

Ethno-Religious Politics: Nigeria's political landscape is fragmented along ethnic and religious lines. This fragmentation influences public sector appointments, federal resource allocation, and policy implementation. Ethno-religious politics often leads to conflict, weakens national identity, and undermines the legitimacy of public institutions (Osaghae, 1998). Abagen and Shom (2023) stated that political economy was simply referred to as economics in the 19th century. In other words, throughout the time of the classical economists, the terms "economics" and "political economy" were interchangeable. Therefore, it implies that political economics went through a number of stages before reaching the current level of discourse.

The Relationship between Public Administration and Political Economy

Public administration and political economy are deeply interconnected because administration functions within a political and economic environment shaped by power, resources, and institutions. Public administration refers to the organization, coordination, and implementation of government policies and programmes, while political economy studies how political forces and economic interests interact to shape policy outcomes and resource distribution. Political economy provides the context, and public administration provides the machinery through which governance is exercised.

The influence of political economy on public administration is clear in how political institutions and interests determine administrative design and performance. Political patronage, rent-seeking, and weak accountability systems often distort the neutrality of the civil service, reducing efficiency and effectiveness (Cooper & Reggie, 2025). For instance, in South Africa, political interference in administrative appointments has undermined service delivery, demonstrating how political economy directly constrains bureaucratic performance (Mogashoa, 2023). Conversely, the quality of administration influences political economy outcomes. Where bureaucracies are transparent, meritocratic, and efficient, they contribute to economic development, equity, and legitimacy of governance. Evidence from Vietnam demonstrates that local administrative effectiveness and transparency significantly boost economic growth, proving that administrative capacity is not only a political tool but also an economic driver (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Historically, public administration theory attempted to separate politics from administration, as seen in Wilson's (1887) politics-administration dichotomy. However, later scholarship has shown that the two are inseparable. Policy choices emerge from political economy contests, where interest groups, ideologies, and institutions compete, and administrators transform these into implementable programmes (Sha, 2022). This demonstrates that public administration is not simply technical but operates within a field of power relations. Moreover, administrative values reflect broader political economy choices. Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) argue that the New Public Service model reframes citizens as active participants rather than passive clients, emphasizing democracy, transparency, and collaboration as integral to governance. Similarly, public administration studies highlight that ethical and political values such as sustainability, fairness, and equity are central to administrative decision-making (Sager & Rosser, 2021). In Nigeria, the relationship between public administration and political economy is particularly evident. Despite adopting reforms such as SERVICOM

and anti-corruption measures, entrenched political economy structures including patronage, ethnicity, and rentier politics have limited the effectiveness of administration. While Nigeria invests enormous resources in its bureaucracy for national development (Ighodalo, 2018), reform outcomes remain modest because they do not adequately address the underlying political economy incentives that sustain inefficiency and corruption.

On the other hand, political economy provides an important context for understanding these administrative challenges. Abagen and Shom (2023) note that in the 19th century, “political economy” was simply referred to as “economics.” During the era of the classical economists, the terms were used interchangeably, reflecting the inseparable connection between politics and economics. Over time, however, political economy evolved through various stages, developing into a distinct discourse concerned with how political forces shape economic outcomes, and vice versa.

Interrelationships between Political Processes and Economic Systems

The interrelationship between politics and economics is best understood as reciprocal: political processes determine the rules of the economic game, while economic outcomes reshape the legitimacy, stability, and evolution of political institutions. The balance differs across contexts — stable and inclusive in developed states, vulnerable but reform-oriented in developing ones, and fragile in under-developed states. Political processes and economic systems are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Political institutions, policy choices, and stability directly shape economic structures, while economic distribution, sectoral composition, and performance influence political behaviour, legitimacy, and institutional development.

However, Political Processes Shaping Economic Systems as follow:

First, institutions and policy credibility strongly affect economic performance. Strong legal frameworks, rule of law, and independent regulatory agencies lower transaction costs and create incentives for long-term investment (World Bank, 2024). Conversely, weak or unpredictable institutions increase uncertainty and discourage capital inflows.

Second, state capacity and public finance determine the extent to which governments can mobilize resources for development. Effective tax systems and efficient expenditure allow states to build infrastructure, expand education and health services, and promote industrialization. Countries with weak fiscal capacity often fall into cycles of low investment and poor human development (OECD, 2024).

Third, political stability influences growth. Empirical evidence shows that political instability, such as frequent government turnover or contested elections, reduces investment and slows GDP growth in both developed and developing economies (Dirks, 2024). Stable political environments support policy continuity, which is essential for sustained growth.

On the other hand, economic structures also influence political dynamics. Distributional outcomes of economic growth shape electoral behavior and coalition formation. Rising inequality is linked to declining trust in democratic institutions and the rise of populist movements in advanced economies (OECD, 2024).

The sectoral composition of an economy also matters. Resource-dependent economies often encourage rent-seeking and clientelism, while diversified industrial economies foster broader coalitions that sustain stable, rules-based governance (Hall & Soskice, 2001).

Moreover, external economic shocks such as commodity price fluctuations or global financial crises frequently reconfigure domestic politics. For example, trade shocks in developing countries often provoke protectionist or populist responses that reshape policy priorities (World Bank, 2024).

The Contexts of Developed, Developing, and underdeveloped countries

In developed countries, political processes typically focus on redistribution, social welfare, and technological regulation within the framework of robust institutions. Economic systems, in turn, provide the fiscal base and legitimacy to sustain democratic contestation (OECD, 2024).

In developing countries, weaker institutions and limited fiscal capacity often constrain policy effectiveness. Political incentives may favor short-term clientelist spending rather than long-term investment, making these economies highly vulnerable to global shocks (World Bank, 2024).

In under-developed countries, the relationship becomes a vicious cycle: weak political authority undermines economic performance, while poor economic outcomes further erode legitimacy. UNDP (2023) emphasizes that breaking this cycle requires simultaneous state-building and economic development, prioritizing legitimacy and service delivery before rapid liberalization.

Federal Character and Revenue Allocation

The 1999 Constitution institutionalizes the federal character principle (s.14 [3]) to ensure representation of Nigeria’s diverse ethnic and regional groups in public appointments. It also establishes the Federation Account (s.162), which centralizes revenue collection and redistribution to federal, state, and local

governments. While designed for inclusivity and unity, these mechanisms influence recruitment, promotion, and spending priorities in ways that sometimes conflict with merit-based and efficiency-driven administrative models.

Nigeria's Political Economy and Public Administration

i. Resource Dependence and Fiscal Politics

Nigeria's fiscal structure is dominated by oil, which contributes over 50% of government revenues and more than 80% of export earnings (Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [NEITI], 2023). This dependence encourages distributive politics—allocating oil rents via the Federation Account—rather than cultivating a robust domestic tax base (Ake, 1981). Administrative agencies therefore focus on disbursement rather than revenue generation, leading to cyclical budget instability during oil price shocks. Fiscal policy is essentially concerned with manipulating the financial operations of the government to achieve certain economic policy objectives. In other words, it involves government decisions to vary key fiscal aggregates such as total government spending and tax revenues, as opposed to other aspects of public finance that focus mainly on the effects of specific government expenditures and taxes (Stein, 1968, in Babalola, 2015). According to Oye and Alege (2022), citing the World Bank (2014), fiscal and monetary policies are the two most significant tools available to policymakers in guiding an economy towards attaining desired macroeconomic objectives. Both are essential for maintaining macroeconomic stability and ensuring medium- to long-term economic growth and welfare.

In Nigeria, the interaction between fiscal and monetary policies is particularly important due to the need for alignment between the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and the Federal Ministry of Finance (FMF). The CBN and the FMF are independent institutions responsible for monetary and fiscal policies respectively. However, under the CBN Act of 2007, the Bank is granted operational independence to direct monetary policy using its instruments. Despite these frameworks, the management of the Nigerian state in recent times has failed in its constitutional obligation to secure lives, protect property, and ensure an enabling environment for economic activities (Ogundiya & Titus, 2024). Insecurity has deeply affected the country, disrupting social relations, politics, and the economy. Similarly, Ozoh and Dinwobi (2018) emphasize that this unpalatable situation has posed serious challenges to Nigeria's socio-economic development.

ii. Prebendal Pressures in Bureaucratic Practice

Joseph's (1987) analysis remains relevant in explaining Nigeria's administrative patterns:

Political appointments are often influenced by ethnic and regional balancing.

Civil service postings and promotions may be driven by patronage networks.

Budget allocations are sometimes distributed thinly across constituencies to satisfy multiple stakeholders, reducing economies of scale in public investment.

iii. Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations

The Federation Account's design means that states and local governments rely heavily on federal transfers. This limits the incentive for subnational tax reform and encourages political bargaining over revenue sharing formulas. Federal ministries must often rely on conditional grants and negotiated compacts to influence subnational service delivery in sectors like health and education (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

8. Case Studies in Administrative Reform and Political Economy

1. The Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) 2021 and NNPC Limited

The PIA (NUPRC, 2021) marked a watershed in Nigeria's oil governance, converting the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation into NNPC Limited—a commercially oriented entity under the Companies and Allied Matters Act. The Act introduced clearer fiscal rules, corporate governance structures, and revenue-sharing arrangements. For public administration, the reform sought to:

Separate policy-making from commercial operations.

I. Enhance transparency through audited financial reporting.

II. Reduce political interference in operational decisions.

Host Communities Development Trusts (HCDTs)

The PIA also mandated the creation of HCDTs funded by 3% of oil companies' operational expenditure. This mechanism institutionalizes corporate–community relations into a rule-bound administrative framework with boards, management committees, and audit requirements (NUPRC, 2022). Properly implemented, it can reduce community unrest and oil infrastructure sabotage, enhancing both administrative stability and economic performance.

Social Protection amid Inflationary Pressures

The removal of fuel subsidies in 2023, alongside global commodity price spikes, sharply increased living costs (Stutern, 2023). This has pressured public administration to expand social safety nets like the National Social Investment Programme.

Implementation challenges—such as targeting accuracy, digital payment infrastructure, and monitoring—highlight the capacity constraints of Nigeria’s bureaucratic apparatus in times of economic crisis.

Challenges of Public Administration in Nigeria

Politicization of the Civil Service: The Nigerian civil service is often undermined by political interference. Political leaders interfere with recruitment, promotions, and policy decisions, making it difficult for civil servants to operate with professionalism and neutrality. This politicization erodes public trust and reduces administrative efficiency.

Corruption and Lack of Accountability: Corruption remains pervasive across all levels of public administration. Embezzlement of funds, contract inflation, bribery, and nepotism are rampant. Despite the establishment of anti-corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), enforcement is often selective and politically motivated (Transparency International, 2023).

Poor Budgetary Implementation: Nigeria’s annual budgets are often unrealistic and poorly implemented. Over 70% of the national budget is allocated to recurrent expenditure, leaving little room for capital projects. Budget delays, inflated contracts, and lack of performance monitoring further hinder the effectiveness of public spending (BudgIT, 2023).

Weak Institutions and Regulatory Frameworks: Most public institutions lack autonomy, capacity, and the necessary tools for effective service delivery. Regulatory agencies are often underfunded and compromised by political interference. This institutional weakness results in poor policy implementation and limited oversight (World Bank, 2022).

Insecurity and Governance Deficits: Rising insecurity—including terrorism, kidnapping, and banditry has disrupted public administration in many regions of the country. Government presence is minimal in conflict zones, and public servants often fear working in volatile areas. This insecurity undermines national development and service delivery.

Recommendations for Administrative Efficiency

The Nigerian case illustrates that administrative efficiency cannot be divorced from political economy realities. Key recommendations include:

Revenue accountability link: Expanding domestic taxation could strengthen citizen oversight and improve performance incentives for public agencies (Ake, 1981). Balancing inclusion and merit: Federal character provisions must be implemented transparently to avoid undermining competency-based recruitment (Joseph, 1987).

1. Rule-bound resource allocation: Instruments like the HCDT can insulate some spending streams from political capture, improving service delivery predictability (NUPRC, 2022).
2. Strengthened intergovernmental collaboration: Given constitutional constraints, performance-based grants could be used to align state and federal priorities in service delivery.
3. Diversify the economy beyond oil.
4. Professionalize the civil service with merit-based recruitment and promotion.
5. Deepen democratic governance and citizen participation.
6. Implement sustainable public sector reforms.

Conclusion

Public administration is not only the machinery for implementing state policies but also a reflection of the broader political economy within which it operates. Its capacity to drive socio-economic development depends largely on the quality of governance and the structural dynamics of the state. Thus, the understanding of both public administration and political economy is necessary to explain the successes and limitations of administrative reforms in Nigeria and beyond. Public administration in Nigeria operates within a political economy defined by oil dependence, prebendalism, constitutional federalism, and distributive politics. Reforms like the PIA and targeted social protection illustrate that structural changes are possible, but success depends on insulating administrative processes from excessive political manipulation while improving fiscal accountability. The interaction between Nigeria’s political economy and its administrative system will continue to determine the effectiveness of governance and the prospects for sustainable development.

Public administration cannot be understood in isolation from political economy. Political economy provides the incentives, power relations, and institutional constraints that shape administrative performance, while public administration influences political economy outcomes by determining whether governance delivers growth, equity, and legitimacy. Effective reform requires addressing both sides: strengthening administrative capacity while reshaping political economy dynamics to foster accountability, transparency, and sustainable development.

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