

**Leadership, Institutional Trust, and Anti-Corruption
Governance in Nigeria: Insights from Institutional Theory**

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Abstract

Corruption remains one of Nigeria's most pressing governance challenges, eroding state legitimacy, weakening institutional trust, and obstructing socio-economic development. Despite repeated reform efforts, anti-corruption campaigns have often produced short-lived gains followed by stagnation, largely due to selective enforcement and institutional fragility. The paper adopted documentary method; data were collected from secondary sources. This article applies Institutional Theory to examine the role of leadership in shaping anti-corruption governance in Nigeria. Institutional Theory highlights how formal rules, informal norms, and cultural-cognitive frameworks interact to sustain or undermine governance structures. The paper found that Nigeria's historical and contemporary anti-corruption initiatives from the establishment of the EFCC and ICPC to recent transparency reforms has been challenged by leadership failure. Thus, it stressed that leadership is crucial in cultivating institutional trust and legitimacy. The recurrent

leadership failures, politicization of enforcement, and weak institutionalization have perpetuated cycles of corruption. It recommends that sustainable anti-corruption reform requires both insulating institutions from partisan manipulation and embedding practices that encourage citizen cooperation and compliance. And concludes that; Nigeria's pathway to sustainable reform lies in leadership, that prioritizes institutional resilience, embeds transparency mechanisms, and enhances public trust in state institutions.

Keywords: Corruption, Anti-corruption governance, Institutional Theory, leadership, institutional trust, legitimacy, transparency

Introduction

Nigeria's governance landscape has long been shaped by pervasive corruption, which erodes state capacity, delegitimizes institutions, and impedes democratic consolidation (Smith, 2007). The corrosive effects of corruption are visible across sectors, from procurement scandals in the oil industry to weak enforcement of campaign finance regulations and politicization of the judiciary (Shaxson, 2009; Omotola, 2006). Leadership responses to corruption have been mixed, ranging from highly publicized anti-corruption campaigns and symbolic declarations to selective prosecutions of political opponents. While agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) were created to institutionalize accountability, the persistence of systemic corruption highlights

deeper institutional weaknesses that transcend individual leaders or administrations (Ribadu, 2010).

Institutional Theory provides a powerful analytical lens for examining these dynamics. It emphasizes how governance outcomes depend not only on formal rules but also on normative expectations and cultural-cognitive beliefs that shape legitimacy and compliance (Scott, 2014). In the Nigerian context, this means understanding why laws and agencies are often circumvented by entrenched patronage networks, why societal norms may tolerate rent-seeking, and how citizens' perceptions of fairness or selective justice affect their willingness to trust and cooperate with state institutions (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

Corruption undermines state legitimacy and service delivery, depressing public trust in core institutions and weakening accountability. Institutional Theory suggests that durable anti-corruption governance depends on the alignment of regulative rules, normative expectations, and cultural-cognitive beliefs (Scott, 2014). Leadership plays a critical role as an institutional entrepreneur capable of altering incentive structures, reshaping normative commitments, and reframing what is considered legitimate political behavior (DiMaggio, 1988).

Against this backdrop, this article explores three interconnected questions: (1) How does leadership shape institutional trust in Nigeria's anti-corruption governance? (2) To what extent do institutional weaknesses constrain leadership effectiveness in

anti-corruption reforms? (3) What insights can Institutional Theory provide for designing sustainable governance reforms in Nigeria?

The study adopted a documentary method, while data were collected from secondary sources, while content analysis was adopted for the analysis of data.

Literature Review

State capacity and selective enforcement

Nigeria's anti-corruption trajectory underscores the persistent gap between ambitious statutory mandates and the reality of weak institutional capacity. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), established in 2003, quickly gained prominence under Nuhu Ribadu's leadership, which showcased how individual initiative and political will could temporarily energize investigations and prosecutions (Ribadu, 2010; Omotola, 2006). Yet this burst of activism also revealed the fragility of enforcement, as political interference, selective targeting, and executive pressure constrained the commission's autonomy. Comparative scholarship suggests that such outcomes are not unique to Nigeria: anti-corruption reforms tend to falter in contexts where courts lack independence, where case management is inconsistent, and where prosecutorial discretion is left unchecked (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). The Nigerian experience underscores a paradox of state capacity, whereby institutions are formally endowed with authority yet remain susceptible to politicization in practice.

Trust and legitimacy

Trust refers to the expectation that an actor, institution, or system will act in ways that are reliable, fair, and beneficial, even in the presence of uncertainty (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). It is fundamentally relational, involving a willingness of individuals or groups to be vulnerable to the actions of others based on perceived competence, integrity, and benevolence (Hardin, 2002). In political and governance contexts, trust in institutions is critical because it shapes citizens' compliance, cooperation, and engagement (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

Legitimacy is the perception that an authority, institution, or system has the right to rule and that its decisions ought to be accepted and obeyed (Weber, 1978/2019). It goes beyond mere compliance based on coercion or incentives; legitimacy involves normative acceptance, where citizens believe that institutions are appropriate, just, and aligned with shared values (Beetham, 1991). In governance, legitimacy is a cornerstone of stability, as institutions perceived as legitimate face less resistance and enjoy greater public cooperation (Suchman, 1995).

Trust and legitimacy are closely intertwined. Trust can reinforce legitimacy by encouraging voluntary compliance and confidence in institutional processes, while legitimacy enhances trust by signaling fairness, accountability, and shared norms (Gilley, 2009). When trust erodes, legitimacy often declines, undermining the effectiveness of governance structures.

Beyond formal capacity, the effectiveness of anti-corruption enforcement depends on public trust in institutions. Surveys

such as Afrobarometer (2020) consistently reveal that Nigerian citizens exhibit low confidence in both anti-corruption agencies and the judiciary, especially when enforcement is perceived as partisan or when elites appear immune from sanction (Okojie & Momoh, 2021). The “quality of government” literature suggests that legitimacy hinges less on absolute effectiveness and more on the perception of impartiality and fairness. Even incremental improvements in consistency and neutrality can strengthen voluntary compliance and civic cooperation (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008; Bauhr & Charron, 2018). In Nigeria, however, selective prosecutions have reinforced perceptions of impunity, weakening the very legitimacy that anti-corruption campaigns seek to bolster.

Leadership as institutional entrepreneurship

Leadership often serves as the entry point for institutional change. DiMaggio (1988) conceptualizes leaders as “institutional entrepreneurs” capable of mobilizing coalitions, altering incentives, and embedding new norms. Ribadu’s tenure at the EFCC illustrates how a reform-minded leader can catalyze enforcement practices that depart from entrenched patterns. Yet as North (1990) reminds us, durable institutional change requires more than charismatic leadership it depends on embedding practices in rules and routines that outlast individual actors. Nigerian case narratives repeatedly demonstrate a “boom-and-bust” cycle, where reform momentum tied to strong personalities is reversed once leadership changes, leaving institutions exposed to capture or neglect.

Leadership, particularly in governance and institutional contexts, should extend beyond charisma and personal influence to encompass the capacity to initiate, embed, and sustain change within organizations. DiMaggio (1988) describes leaders as *institutional entrepreneurs* who can mobilize coalitions, reshape incentives, and introduce new norms into existing structures. Such leaders are critical in setting reform agendas and challenging entrenched practices, as illustrated by Ribadu's leadership at Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), where enforcement approaches temporarily departed from patterns of impunity.

However, leadership must not be confined to individual reform efforts. North (1990) emphasizes that sustainable institutional change depends on embedding reforms into formal rules and organizational routines that endure beyond individual actors. This view highlights the necessity of institutionalizing leadership efforts so that reforms are not dependent on the vision or will of a single leader. In contexts like Nigeria, the recurring "boom-and-bust" cycle of reform demonstrates the danger of overly personalized leadership: momentum is often lost once reformist leaders exit, leaving institutions vulnerable to politicization or neglect (North, 1990; DiMaggio, 1988).

Therefore, effective leadership should entail both the visionary capacity to drive change and the strategic foresight to institutionalize reforms through durable systems, processes, and norms. It involves balancing short-term mobilization with long-term consolidation, ensuring that institutions develop resilience

against capture and remain functional beyond the tenure of individual leaders.

Informal institutions and political economy

Informal institutions refer to the unwritten rules, norms, and practices that shape social and political behavior outside of formally codified laws and regulations. Helmke and Levitsky (2004) define informal institutions as socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels. Unlike formal institutions, which are codified in constitutions, laws, or organizational rules, informal institutions operate through cultural expectations, social obligations, and tacit understandings.

These institutions play a critical role in shaping governance and political outcomes. For example, in many developing contexts, patron-client networks, ethnic allegiances, and personal relationships often exert greater influence than formal legal frameworks (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). Informal institutions can either complement or undermine formal ones. When they align with formal rules, they enhance stability and compliance; however, when they contradict them, they may foster corruption, favoritism, or institutional weakness (North, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

In the Nigerian context, informal institutions such as patronage politics, kinship ties, and informal bargaining often determine how state resources are distributed and how rules are enforced in practice. This illustrates that while formal institutions may exist

on paper, informal norms frequently dictate the real dynamics of power, governance, and accountability (Olowu, 2019).

Thus, informal institutions entail the embedded cultural and social practices that regulate behavior outside of formal frameworks. Understanding them is crucial because they often explain why formal reforms succeed or fail in practice.

A deeper challenge lies in the entanglement of formal rules with Nigeria's dense web of informal institutions. Patronage networks, clientelism, and elite bargains shape incentives across the public sector, often crowding out formal enforcement mechanisms (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Smith, 2007). Nowhere is this more evident than in the governance of the oil sector and subsidy regimes, where entrenched interests have repeatedly undermined transparency reforms and resisted accountability (Shaxson, 2009). The persistence of informal institutions complicates reform trajectories: formal laws may be passed, agencies created, and strategies announced, but outcomes remain mediated by networks that prioritize loyalty and rents over impartial enforcement.

What works?

Despite these constraints, a growing body of evidence points to promising interventions. Transparency initiatives such as e-procurement and open contracting portals can reduce opportunities for rent-seeking, while prosecutorial specialization and professional protections for investigators enhance institutional resilience (Ribadu, 2010; Bauhr & Charron, 2018). However, the impact of these measures is contingent on credible

enforcement and civic uptake. Reforms that lack broad-based legitimacy or that are undermined by informal incentives rarely achieve sustained success. In short, “what works” is less about technical fixes and more about embedding reforms within trusted, impartial, and politically insulated institutions.

Despite a rich literature, three gaps remain underexplored in Nigerian anti-corruption research:

Causal identification of trust effects: Most studies document associations between anti-corruption efforts and public confidence but rarely identify causal relationships. There is a need for longitudinal and experimental research that examines how specific leadership actions—such as cross-partisan prosecutions or transparent contracting reforms shift levels of institutional trust and compliance over time.

Integration of informal incentives: While scholars acknowledge the role of patronage and informal networks, these factors are often treated descriptively. We lack analytical models that quantify how informal institutions mediate the translation of formal reforms into actual outcomes, particularly in the Nigerian public sector.

Micro-level behavioral mechanisms: There has been limited use of field experiments, ethnographic work, or administrative microdata to study how frontline actors—prosecutors, auditors, procurement officers interpret and adapt to new rules. Equally, little is known about how ordinary citizens update their beliefs and behaviors in response to visible enforcement actions or reforms.

RESULTS

Nigeria in Practice: Illustrative Vignettes

Vignette 1: EFCC and the challenge of institutionalization

The early trajectory of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in the 2000s illustrates both the potential and limits of leadership-driven reform. Under Nuhu Ribadu, the EFCC signaled a raised risk environment for grand corruption through high-profile prosecutions and asset seizures that were unprecedented in scope (Ribadu, 2010). These actions temporarily shifted the calculus of political and business elites, suggesting that impunity was no longer guaranteed. However, the agency's dependence on individual leadership made its trajectory highly volatile. Subsequent leadership changes coincided with growing political contestation, with prosecutions increasingly perceived as selective or politically motivated (Omotola, 2006). This volatility undermined the predictability of enforcement which is one of Suchman's (1995) core conditions for institutional legitimacy. In effect, the EFCC became emblematic of Nigeria's broader reform dilemma: initial bursts of credibility anchored in personality, followed by reversals when institutional safeguards proved weak.

Vignette 2: Fuel subsidy scandals and the problem of selective justice

Nigeria's recurring fuel subsidy scandals provide a window into how entrenched interests exploit regulatory loopholes and weak enforcement capacity. Investigations in the late 2000s and early 2010s uncovered massive fraud involving "ghost" fuel deliveries, inflated claims, and collusion between regulators, importers, and political actors (Shaxson, 2009). Parliamentary committees and civil society groups brought attention to the scale of rent extraction, yet prosecutorial follow-through was limited and fragmented. The absence of consistent convictions signaled to the public that accountability was negotiable, particularly for politically connected actors. This gap between exposure and sanction reinforced perceptions of selective justice, deepening citizen skepticism of anti-corruption rhetoric. In surveys and public discourse, these scandals became shorthand for systemic impunity, eroding trust in both formal institutions and government promises of reform.

Vignette 3: Asset recovery and the credibility dilemma

High-profile cases of asset recovery and repatriation, such as the return of funds looted by former military ruler Sani Abacha, highlight the symbolic potential of anti-corruption efforts. Successful recoveries can serve as visible proof of state capacity and international cooperation, temporarily boosting credibility (Ribadu, 2010). Yet without transparent frameworks for reallocating recovered assets and independent oversight of their use, these victories risk being perceived as episodic rather than

systemic. Afrobarometer (2020) surveys reveal that Nigerians often view repatriated funds with suspicion, fearing they may be recycled into new patronage networks rather than invested in public goods. In this sense, asset recovery initiatives can paradoxically reinforce cynicism if not embedded in broader accountability mechanisms. The lesson is that while headline recoveries matter for visibility, legitimacy depends on the consistent and transparent governance of these resources.

Institutional Theory and Governance

Institutional Theory provides a powerful lens for analyzing why anti-corruption reforms often struggle to take root. Institutions, understood as regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures, create the “rules of the game” that shape organizational and state behavior (Scott, 2014). They not only constrain actors through formal rules but also enable and legitimize particular practices by embedding them within broader social expectations.

Regulative dimension: This dimension emphasizes laws, regulations, and formal enforcement mechanisms. In theory, anti-corruption agencies such as Nigeria’s Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) embody this dimension by wielding statutory authority to investigate and prosecute. However, where enforcement capacity is weak and judicial independence compromised, formal rules remain aspirational rather than effective (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

Normative dimension: This refers to values, norms, and social expectations that shape what actors view as appropriate conduct.

In Nigeria, normative pressures are often double-edged. On the one hand, civil society groups and the media exert pressure for greater accountability; on the other hand, deeply embedded patron-client relationships normalize practices such as gift-giving, favoritism, and rent-sharing (Smith, 2007). This normative ambivalence complicates reform efforts, as behaviors condemned in official discourse may still be socially tolerated or even rewarded in practice.

Cultural-cognitive dimension: This dimension captures the shared beliefs, taken-for-granted practices, and cognitive frames that make institutions appear legitimate and natural (Scott, 2014). In Nigeria, widespread perceptions that “everyone is corrupt” or that political office is primarily a vehicle for personal enrichment sustain a cultural-cognitive environment in which anti-corruption initiatives face skepticism. These beliefs weaken the ability of formal reforms to shift everyday practices, as citizens and officials alike often assume enforcement will be selective or temporary.

Applied to Nigeria, Institutional Theory underscores the need for alignment between leadership initiatives and institutional environments. Formal reforms—such as the establishment of new agencies or passage of stricter laws—cannot succeed in isolation if they remain misaligned with normative and cultural-cognitive structures. Weak enforcement capacity, entrenched patronage systems, and a cultural tolerance for corruption undercut the credibility of reforms and prevent institutionalization (North, 1990). Leadership can play a catalytic role by mobilizing support and signaling new norms, but

sustainable change requires strengthening institutional legitimacy. This entails not only building effective enforcement capacity but also cultivating public trust, reshaping social expectations around accountability, and embedding anti-corruption practices into everyday governance.

Leadership and Anti-Corruption Governance in Nigeria

Leadership plays a critical role in setting the tone for governance and signaling the state's commitment to accountability. In Nigeria, successive leaders from military regimes to democratic administrations have sought to define their legitimacy in part through anti-corruption campaigns. These initiatives have often been highly visible, accompanied by strong rhetoric and the establishment of new institutions.

For instance, President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration (1999–2007) marked a turning point by establishing the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003, under the pioneering leadership of Nuhu Ribadu. This move projected a renewed seriousness in tackling financial crimes and money laundering, while also signaling to international partners, particularly donors and foreign investors, that Nigeria was committed to reform (Ribadu, 2010). Similarly, President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) placed anti-corruption at the center of his political platform, drawing on his military-era reputation for discipline and integrity (Agbiboa, 2015). His administration launched initiatives targeting procurement transparency, public payroll verification, and asset declarations,

reflecting an attempt to embed anti-corruption within broader governance structures.

Yet the historical record shows that leadership-driven efforts often fall short of institutionalization. The challenge lies not only in resource constraints but also in the politicization of enforcement. Under both Obasanjo and Buhari, critics observed patterns of selective prosecution, where political rivals or non-aligned elites bore the brunt of investigations, while allies were shielded from scrutiny (Omotola, 2006). This perception of “anti-corruption as weapon” undermines institutional trust, as citizens and political actors interpret enforcement less as impartial rule of law and more as a tool of partisan contestation.

Institutional Theory helps explain why leadership initiatives rarely produce lasting transformation. As DiMaggio and Powell (1991) argue, institutional legitimacy depends on consistent application of rules across political and social divides, supported by normative acceptance and cultural-cognitive resonance. When enforcement is inconsistent, reforms appear opportunistic rather than systemic, eroding their normative legitimacy. Nigerian leaders have thus been able to catalyze short-term momentum, but without embedding anti-corruption practices into broader regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures, campaigns remain vulnerable to reversal once political incentives shift. Leadership matters, but its effectiveness depends on building durable institutions that outlast personalities. Without impartial enforcement and broad-based legitimacy, even the most ambitious anti-corruption agendas risk reinforcing the very cynicism they aim to overcome.

Institutional Trust and Public Perceptions

Institutional trust is a cornerstone of governance effectiveness. Where citizens perceive public institutions as impartial, predictable, and aligned with collective interests, they are more likely to comply voluntarily with rules, cooperate with enforcement, and participate in civic life (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). Conversely, distrust breeds cynicism, weakens compliance, and incentivizes individuals to circumvent formal institutions through informal networks.

In Nigeria, public trust in anti-corruption bodies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) remains fragile. Survey data consistently show that many Nigerians doubt the independence and impartiality of these agencies, viewing them instead as extensions of political elites or as instruments deployed selectively against opponents (Afrobarometer, 2020; Okojie & Momoh, 2021). This perception is reinforced by high-profile cases where investigations stall, prosecutions are abandoned, or well-connected individuals escape meaningful sanction.

Institutional Theory helps to explain why trust deficits persist. According to Suchman (1995), institutions derive legitimacy from three conditions: regulative (adherence to rules and enforcement consistency), normative (alignment with shared values and expectations), and cultural-cognitive (embedding practices in taken-for-granted beliefs). In Nigeria, failures of leadership to insulate anti-corruption agencies from political interference

erode these dimensions of legitimacy. Inconsistent enforcement weakens regulative credibility; selective prosecutions undermine normative legitimacy by appearing partisan; and recurring cycles of reform and reversal prevent cultural-cognitive consolidation, leaving citizens skeptical that anti-corruption is anything more than episodic.

The consequences of fragile institutional trust are far-reaching. When citizens perceive anti-corruption bodies as politicized, they are less likely to cooperate with investigations, report misconduct, or comply with new rules. This creates a vicious cycle: weak trust leads to poor compliance, which in turn undermines the effectiveness of institutions, further deepening cynicism. Breaking this cycle requires not only technical reforms but also visible demonstrations of impartiality such as prosecuting cross-partisan elites, ensuring judicial independence, and embedding transparent oversight mechanisms. Only by strengthening legitimacy across regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions can Nigerian anti-corruption institutions build the trust needed for durable governance effectiveness.

Case Studies: Anti-Corruption Campaigns in Practice

Three key case studies illustrate the complex interplay between leadership initiatives and institutional trust in Nigeria's anti-corruption governance. Each period highlights both the catalytic role of leadership and the enduring obstacles posed by weak institutionalization and politicization.

Obasanjo Era (1999–2007)

The return to civilian rule in 1999 created an opportunity to reset Nigeria's governance trajectory. President Olusegun Obasanjo launched ambitious reforms to signal a break from military-era impunity. The creation of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in 2000 and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003 marked significant institutional innovations, giving Nigeria specialized bodies to investigate and prosecute corruption (Akinrinade, 2006). Under Nuhu Ribadu, the EFCC pursued several high-profile cases, targeting governors, ministers, and business elites. These efforts initially boosted perceptions of state seriousness. Yet over time, the agency's actions were increasingly seen as selective, with critics arguing that prosecutions disproportionately targeted Obasanjo's political opponents while allies enjoyed impunity. This selective enforcement undermined normative legitimacy and entrenched public skepticism, illustrating the difficulty of aligning leadership initiatives with institutional impartiality.

Jonathan Era (2010–2015)

President Goodluck Jonathan's administration introduced governance reforms, particularly in the oil sector, including attempts at greater transparency in subsidy management and extractive revenues. However, these measures were overshadowed by large-scale scandals, most notably the 2012 fuel subsidy fraud, which exposed systemic collusion between government officials, regulators, and private actors (Shaxson, 2009). Despite parliamentary inquiries and civil society pressure, prosecutions were limited, reinforcing public perceptions of elite

impunity. The government's failure to follow through with credible enforcement eroded trust in leadership's commitment to anti-corruption. Citizens increasingly viewed reforms as symbolic gestures rather than substantive change. This period highlights the gap between reform design and enforcement credibility, where institutional weakness negated leadership rhetoric.

Buhari Era (2015–2023)

Muhammadu Buhari campaigned and governed on a strong anti-corruption platform, leveraging his personal reputation as an "incorruptible" former military ruler (Agbibo, 2015). Early in his tenure, Buhari's credibility gave momentum to initiatives such as payroll verification (IPPS), the Treasury Single Account (TSA), and asset declarations. For a time, these measures increased public expectations that entrenched corruption could finally be tackled. However, institutional weaknesses soon resurfaced. High-profile prosecutions often stalled, while selective enforcement remained a recurring criticism, with opposition politicians more frequently targeted than ruling party elites. Moreover, the judiciary's perceived vulnerability to executive pressure further undermined public trust. By the end of Buhari's second term, citizens' initial optimism had given way to disappointment, with many regarding anti-corruption drives as politicized and inconsistent (Transparency International, 2022).

Synthesis and Institutional Theory Insight

Taken together, these case studies reinforce a central claim of Institutional Theory: leadership is necessary to catalyze change but insufficient to sustain it. Leaders can design reforms, create institutions, and mobilize public support, but legitimacy depends on consistent enforcement, rule-based governance, and the gradual embedding of new norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Suchman, 1995). In Nigeria, the persistence of selective justice and politicized enforcement undermined regulative credibility, eroded normative legitimacy, and prevented cultural-cognitive consolidation. As a result, anti-corruption reforms remained vulnerable to reversal, with public trust rising and falling in tandem with leadership personalities rather than becoming embedded in institutional routines.

Comparative Perspective

Nigeria's experience is not unique. Across the Global South, leadership-driven anti-corruption campaigns often generate early momentum but tend to falter due to weak institutionalization. In Ghana, successive governments established anti-corruption agencies and pledged impartial enforcement; however, civil society and observers have persistently criticized selective prosecutions and the shielding of political allies from accountability (Aye, 2019). A similar pattern is evident in Kenya, where high-profile commissions and presidential task forces have repeatedly exposed grand corruption scandals, yet enforcement has remained episodic and inconsistent, thereby undermining institutional credibility (Wrong, 2009; Hope, 2014). Beyond Africa, Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) provides a striking

parallel. Initially celebrated as one of the most effective anti-corruption agencies globally and trusted by the public, it has since suffered institutional weakening as political elites moved to constrain its autonomy and reduce its effectiveness (Schütte, 2012; Mietzner, 2020). These comparative cases underscore a broader insight: while strong leaders can catalyze reform energy, durable change requires insulating anti-corruption institutions from political interference and embedding impartiality within the normative and cultural frameworks of governance (Johnston, 2005; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

Discussion: Insights from Institutional Theory

Applying Institutional Theory to Nigeria's anti-corruption governance highlights three interrelated insights that explain both reform momentum and its recurrent stagnation.

Leadership as an Institutional Entrepreneur

Effective leaders can function as *institutional entrepreneurs'* actors who mobilize resources, build coalitions, and introduce new governance arrangements that disrupt entrenched practices (DiMaggio, 1988). In Nigeria, successive administrations have attempted to play this role. Obasanjo's establishment of the EFCC and ICPC in the early 2000s, or Buhari's emphasis on payroll verification and the Treasury Single Account two decades later, illustrate how leadership can drive reform initiatives that momentarily shift expectations and practices. Yet Nigerian experience also demonstrates the limits of leadership without institutionalization. Once these leaders departed or political incentives shifted, reforms often unraveled, leaving institutions

vulnerable to capture and reversal. Leadership can spark change, but without embedding practices in durable structures, campaigns remain personality-driven and short-lived.

Institutional Weakness as a Constraint

Leadership ambition is constrained by the fragility of Nigeria's institutional environment. Patronage politics continues to shape incentives across government, often privileging loyalty and rent-sharing over impartial enforcement (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Smith, 2007). The judiciary, hampered by weak independence and case backlogs, struggles to deliver consistent rulings that would reinforce rule-based governance. At the cultural level, widespread acceptance of corruption as "normal politics" dilutes the normative power of reform, as citizens often assume enforcement will be selective or temporary. These weaknesses mean that even ambitious reforms face powerful countercurrents, preventing new practices from becoming institutionalized (Smith, 2007). In this sense, institutional fragility sets the boundaries within which leadership operates, often reducing reform to symbolic rather than transformative change.

Trust as a Mediator of Governance Outcomes

Institutional trust serves as a key mediator between formal reforms and societal outcomes. According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy arises when institutions are viewed as predictable, fair, and aligned with social norms. In Nigeria, however, public trust in anti-corruption bodies remains fragile. Perceptions that agencies such as the EFCC and ICPC are politically manipulated undermine their regulative and normative legitimacy (Okojie &

Momoh, 2021). Without trust, even technically sound reforms such as open contracting portals or specialized anti-graft courts fail to mobilize societal compliance and support. Citizens are less likely to report corruption, cooperate with investigators, or view prosecutions as credible when enforcement is inconsistent (Okojie & Momoh, 2021). In this way, trust acts as the hinge between institutional design and governance effectiveness: without it, reforms cannot achieve their intended impact.

Conclusion

This study has been able to examine Leadership, Institutional Trust, and Anti-Corruption Governance in Nigeria with insights from institutional theory. It observed that Nigeria's anti-corruption governance reflects the interdependence of leadership, institutional trust, and institutional capacity. Leadership initiatives, while symbolically important, cannot succeed without institutional legitimacy and societal trust. Institutional Theory highlights the need for reforms that strengthen regulative enforcement, align with normative expectations, and reshape cultural-cognitive understandings of corruption.

Taken together, these insights highlight that anti-corruption governance in Nigeria cannot be understood solely through the lens of leadership strength or institutional design. Rather, it reflects the dynamic interaction between leaders, institutional structures, and public perceptions. While reform-minded leadership can act as a catalyst for change (DiMaggio, 1988), weak institutional foundations limit the durability of such

reforms (North, 1990). Moreover, public trust plays a decisive role in determining whether reforms resonate with society or are dismissed as politicized exercises (Levi & Stoker, 2000). From an institutional theory perspective, this explains why Nigerian anti-corruption campaigns often follow cycles of enthusiasm and stagnation: reforms tend to be leader-driven, institutionally fragile, and socially contested (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Gilley, 2009).

The pathway forward, therefore, lies not in short-lived campaigns but in leadership that prioritizes institutional resilience over immediate political gains. Sustainable anti-corruption reform requires both insulating institutions from partisan manipulation and embedding practices that encourage citizen cooperation and compliance.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings regarding the critical intersection of leadership, institutional trust, and anti-corruption governance, sustainable reform requires moving beyond short-lived, personality-driven campaigns to focus on deep institutional resilience.

The following four key recommendations drawn from the analysis, aimed at fostering durable governance effectiveness and rebuilding public trust:

Prioritize Institutional Resilience Over Short-Term Campaigns: Anti-corruption strategies should move beyond temporary, personality-driven campaigns and instead focus on

strengthening institutions. This involves building systems and procedures that can function independently of political turnover, ensuring continuity and credibility.

Insulate Institutions from Partisan Manipulation: Safeguards must be created to protect anti-corruption bodies, the judiciary, and oversight agencies from political interference. This could include transparent appointment processes, financial autonomy, and legal provisions that reduce executive dominance over such institutions.

Embed Durable Practices and Norms: Anti-corruption reform should focus on institutionalizing practices such as merit-based recruitment, consistent enforcement, and routine auditing. Embedding these practices in rules and organizational routines makes reforms less vulnerable to reversal when leadership changes.

Strengthen Citizen Engagement and Cooperation: Public trust and participation are essential for sustainable reform. This requires building channels for citizen reporting, strengthening whistleblower protections, and running public education campaigns that emphasize the societal costs of corruption. When citizens see fairness and consistency in enforcement, compliance and cooperation are more likely.

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