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An Examination of Political Communication and Political Conduct in Strengthening Democracy in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Political communication and political conduct are constitutive pillars of democratic governance, shaping the quality of public deliberation, citizen participation, and institutional trust. Yet in Nigeria, both dimensions have been marked by persistent deficiencies: inflammatory rhetoric, misinformation, electoral violence, and a wide chasm between political promises and governmental performance have collectively undermined democratic consolidation since the return to civilian rule in 1999. This paper examines how political communication, encompassing political messaging, media framing, political discourse, and digital public sphere dynamics, interacts with political conduct to either strengthen or erode democratic governance in Nigeria. Drawing on deliberative democracy theory, framing theory, and the political culture framework, the study analyses selected electoral cycles, legislative discourse patterns, executive communication practices, and the growing role of social media in shaping political narratives. It argues that democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires not only institutional reform but a fundamental reorientation of political communication norms toward transparency, issue-based discourse, and accountable conduct. The paper concludes with a framework for reforming political communication ethics and conduct standards to advance democratic deepening in Nigeria.

Keywords: Political Communication, Political Conduct, Democracy, Nigeria, Electoral Violence, Deliberative Democracy, Media, Social Media, Governance, Political Culture

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1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy, as a system of governance, is fundamentally a communicative enterprise. It is constituted by the exchange of ideas, the articulation of competing interests, the negotiation of power, and the public justification of political decisions. The health of any democracy can therefore be assessed not only by its procedural arrangements, regular elections, separation of powers, constitutional guarantees, but by the quality of the communication through which these arrangements are animated and the conduct of political actors within those arrangements. In contexts where political communication is distorted by misinformation, hate speech, and clientelistic appeals, and where political conduct is characterized by impunity, violence, and institutional subversion, democratic procedures become hollow rituals that mask enduring authoritarian tendencies.

Nigeria presents a compelling and complex case for studying this relationship. Since the transition from military rule in 1999, the country has sustained the institutional framework of electoral democracy, holding successive presidential, gubernatorial, and legislative elections with increasing frequency and relative competitiveness. Yet by most qualitative indicators of democratic quality, including freedom of expression, rule of law, political accountability, citizen participation, and interparty tolerance, Nigerian democracy has remained fragile, contested, and unevenly consolidated (Diamond, 2002; Suberu, 2010). The persistence of electoral violence, vote trading, ethnoreligious manipulation of political discourse, and a dramatic disconnect between campaign rhetoric and governance performance have raised fundamental questions about the democratic character of Nigeria's political practice.

The rise of digital communication technologies, particularly social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok, has introduced new dynamics into Nigerian political communication. These platforms have simultaneously expanded the participatory space available to citizens, enabled the rapid spread of misinformation and coordinated disinformation campaigns, and provided political actors with direct channels to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. The 2023 general elections, widely regarded as a critical moment for Nigerian democracy, demonstrated both the mobilizing potential and the destabilizing risks of digital political communication (SBM Intelligence, 2023).

This paper seeks to interrogate the relationship between political communication, political conduct, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. It asks: In what ways do prevailing patterns of political communication reinforce or undermine democratic norms? How does political conduct, including the behavior of elected officials, party organizations, and state institutions, interact with communication practices to shape democratic culture? And what reforms in communication ethics and political conduct are necessary to advance democratic deepening? The paper makes an original contribution by integrating communication theory with political conduct analysis in the Nigerian context, developing a Political Communication-Conduct-Democracy (PCCD) framework as an analytical and prescriptive tool.



2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Deliberative Democracy Theory

Deliberative democracy theory, associated principally with the work of Jurgen Habermas (1984, 1996) and elaborated by scholars including Cohen (1997) and Gutmann and Thompson (2004), holds that democratic legitimacy derives not merely from electoral procedures but from the quality of public deliberation through which political decisions are reached. In the deliberative model, communication is not merely instrumental—a means of mobilizing support—but constitutive: it is through the exchange of reasons in the public sphere that democratic will is formed and political authority is legitimated.

The deliberative framework establishes normative standards for political communication: it should be inclusive, reasoned, reciprocal, and oriented toward the public good rather than narrow private or partisan interests. Political conduct, correspondingly, should be responsive to deliberative outcomes, transparent in its reasoning, and constrained by shared norms of democratic procedure. Applied to Nigeria, this framework reveals significant deficits: political communication that is primarily mobilizational, identity-based, and performative rather than substantive, and political conduct that is insulated from deliberative accountability.

2.2 Framing Theory

Framing theory, rooted in the sociology of Erving Goffman (1974) and developed in political communication scholarship by Entman (1993) and Scheufele (1999), provides tools for analyzing how political actors and media institutions selectively present political reality to shape public interpretation. Entman defines framing as the process of selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." Political actors who control dominant frames wield significant power over public discourse, shaping what issues are considered important, which actors are deemed credible, and what solutions are regarded as feasible.

In Nigeria, ethnoreligious framing has been particularly pervasive and consequential, with political communication frequently organized around identity claims that define political competition as a zero-sum contest between groups rather than a deliberation among citizens. This framing pattern has both reflected and reinforced a political culture in which ethnic and religious solidarity supersedes programmatic policy debate, with profound implications for democratic accountability and national cohesion.

2.3 Political Culture Framework

Almond and Verba's (1963) political culture framework distinguishes among participant, subject, and parochial orientations toward politics, arguing that democratic stability correlates with a participant culture in which citizens feel capable of influencing political outcomes and perceive the political system as legitimate. Subsequent scholarship by Putnam (1993) and Inglehart (1997) has elaborated the role of social capital, interpersonal trust, and civic engagement in sustaining democratic institutions. Nigeria's political culture has been characterized as a hybrid of parochial and subject orientations, with citizens engaging in political mobilization primarily through ethnic, religious, and patron-client networks rather than as autonomous civic actors (Joseph, 1987).



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Political conduct that reinforces clientelistic exchange and ethnic patronage perpetuates this culture, creating path dependencies that resist democratic reform. Conversely, communication practices and political conduct that model civic norms, issue-based debate, and transparent governance can gradually reshape political culture toward more participatory orientations.

2.4 Political Communication-Conduct-Democracy (PCCD) Framework

This paper proposes an integrated analytical framework, the Political Communication-Conduct-Democracy (PCCD) framework, that conceptualizes political communication and political conduct as co-constitutive variables shaping democratic outcomes. The framework posits three core propositions: first, that political communication sets the normative parameters of democratic deliberation by defining which issues, actors, and arguments are deemed legitimate; second, that political conduct, the actual behavior of political actors, either validates or contradicts the communicative commitments made in the public sphere; and third, that the alignment or misalignment between communication and conduct determines citizen trust, institutional legitimacy, and the sustainability of democratic governance.

When political communication is substantive, inclusive, and honest, and political conduct is responsive, law-abiding, and accountable, democratic institutions strengthen progressively. Conversely, when communication is manipulative, exclusionary, or violent, and conduct is corrupt, impulsive, or authoritarian, democratic institutions erode even when procedural forms are maintained. The Nigerian case illustrates the consequences of chronic misalignment between democratic rhetoric and anti-democratic conduct.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Political Communication and Democracy in Africa

The scholarship on political communication in Africa has grown substantially since the wave of democratization in the 1990s. Hyden, Leslie, and Ogundimu (2002) examine media and democracy across sub-Saharan Africa, finding that state control of broadcast media, weak press freedom protections, and the instrumentalization of journalism by political elites have constrained the development of independent public spheres essential for democratic deliberation. Similarly, Tettey (2001) analyses the ambivalent role of African media in democratic transitions, noting that commercial pressures and political patronage frequently compromise journalistic independence even in nominally free media environments.

In the Nigerian context, Ogundele (2010) and Dare (2011) document how state-owned broadcasters have historically served as propaganda instruments for incumbent governments, systematically denying opposition parties equitable access and framing governance in terms favorable to ruling elites. Nwagbara (2010) analyses political advertising in Nigerian elections, finding a dominance of personality-based and ethnic appeals over issue-based discourse, reflecting and reinforcing the personalistic character of Nigerian political competition.

3.2 Electoral Communication and Democratic Quality

Electoral communication, the strategic messaging deployed by candidates, parties, and campaigns during election cycles, is a primary site for examining the relationship between political communication and democratic quality. Norris (2004) argues that "virtuous circles" of political communication, in which competitive campaigns expose citizens to policy information and stimulate informed participation, can strengthen democratic governance. Conversely, "vicious circles" characterized by negative campaigning, low-information mobilization, and voter suppression undermine democratic quality even when electoral procedures are formally competitive.

Nigerian electoral communication has displayed characteristics more consistent with vicious than virtuous circles. Jega (2012), the former chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), documents the systematic deployment of hate speech, vote-buying propaganda, and ethno-religious incitement in Nigerian campaigns, arguing that such communication patterns undermine the expressive function of elections—their capacity to translate citizen preferences into government mandates. Studies by Omotola (2010) and Suberu (2010) similarly document how incumbent parties use state resources and media access to distort the communicative playing field, creating structural inequalities that disadvantage opposition voices.

3.3 Political Conduct, Impunity, and Democratic Erosion

Political conduct refers to the actual behavioral practices of political actors within democratic institutions—including their adherence to constitutional norms, responsiveness to constituents, management of public resources, and treatment of political opponents. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identify two key norms of democratic conduct: mutual toleration (acceptance of political opponents as legitimate rivals) and institutional forbearance (restraint in the use of institutional powers). When political actors violate these norms, democratic institutions erode progressively through a process they term "democratic backsliding."

Nigerian political conduct has frequently violated both norms. The use of state security apparatus against opposition politicians, the abuse of the electoral system to manipulate outcomes, the weaponization of anti-corruption agencies against perceived opponents, and the selective enforcement of the rule of law have all been documented in the post-1999 period (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022). These conduct deficits undermine the credibility of democratic communication: when political actors communicate democratic commitments while engaging in anti-democratic conduct, citizen trust in political institutions declines precipitously.

3.4 Social Media, Misinformation, and Democratic Discourse

The literature on social media and democracy presents a complex and contested picture. Early scholarship emphasized the democratizing potential of social media—their capacity to lower barriers to political participation, enable horizontal communication among citizens, and bypass state-controlled information channels (Shirky, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013). More recent scholarship has complicated this optimism, documenting how social media platforms facilitate the viral spread of misinformation, enable targeted disinformation campaigns, amplify extreme voices, and create algorithmic filter bubbles that fragment rather than integrate democratic discourse (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018).



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In the Nigerian context, Adeyemi and Adegboyega (2022) analyse the 2019 and 2023 elections, documenting systematic disinformation campaigns coordinated through WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages, including deepfake videos, fabricated polling data, and ethnic incitement. The Dubawa fact-checking initiative and Africa Check have catalogued thousands of false political claims circulated in Nigerian digital spaces during these electoral periods, concluding that the information environment significantly complicated citizens' ability to make informed democratic choices.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA) and document analysis. The choice of qualitative methodology reflects the interpretive nature of the research questions, which require nuanced analysis of meaning, context, and power relations embedded in political communication and conduct rather than merely quantitative measurement of their frequency or distribution.

Critical discourse analysis, drawing on the tradition established by Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (1993), treats political texts, speeches, press releases, social media posts, legislative debates, campaign materials, as social practices that both reflect and reproduce power relations. CDA enables examination of how language choices in political communication construct particular visions of political reality, position certain actors as legitimate or illegitimate, and normalize specific patterns of political conduct. This approach is particularly appropriate for analyzing the Nigerian political context, where communicative strategies are often designed to obscure rather than illuminate political realities.

The document corpus analyzed in this study includes: presidential inaugural and budget speeches (2003-2023); selected National Assembly debate transcripts; official party manifestos and campaign materials from the 2015, 2019, and 2023 general elections; reports from electoral observer missions (ECOWAS, African Union, EU); publications by civil society organizations including YIAGA Africa, Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa); reports from international human rights organizations; and a curated sample of political social media content from the 2023 electoral period.

The analysis proceeds at three levels: textual analysis (examining the linguistic and rhetorical features of political communication); discursive practice analysis (examining how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed within Nigerian political institutions); and social practice analysis (examining the relationship between political communication and broader patterns of political conduct and democratic governance). The study is limited by its focus on formal and semi-formal communication texts, which may not fully capture the full range of political communication in informal settings, and by the methodological challenges of analyzing a rapidly evolving digital communication landscape.



5. PATTERNS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

5.1 Electoral Communication: Rhetoric Versus Substance

Analysis of campaign materials across Nigeria's democratic cycles reveals a persistent and widening gap between communicative promises and governance performance. Presidential campaigns since 1999 have been characterized by sweeping programmatic pledges—poverty eradication, infrastructural transformation, security sector reform, educational expansion—that have rarely translated into substantive policy action. The Obasanjo administration (1999-2007) campaigned on anti-corruption and democratic consolidation but oversaw systematic subversion of constitutional term limits and the use of state resources for political patronage. The Jonathan administration (2011-2015) campaigned on transformation but presided over the height of the fuel subsidy scandal and the Boko Haram security crisis. The Buhari administration (2015-2023) campaigned explicitly on anti-corruption and security but delivered mixed and contested results in both domains (Nwachukwu, 2021).

This communicative pattern, in which democratic messaging is deployed instrumentally to secure electoral mandates rather than as genuine governance commitments, constitutes what this paper terms "performative democracy": a form of political communication that simulates democratic accountability without substantiating it. The consistent experience of communicative betrayal has contributed to the widespread political cynicism documented in surveys by Afrobarometer (2022), which finds that only 29% of Nigerians trust political parties and 38% trust the National Assembly.

5.2 Ethnoreligious Framing and Identity Politics

Perhaps the most structurally significant feature of Nigerian political communication is the pervasiveness of ethnoreligious framing, the systematic organization of political messaging around ethnic and religious identity markers rather than programmatic policy positions. This framing pattern, documented extensively in the literature, manifests across multiple levels: in candidate selection and slate balancing, where ethnoreligious "balance" often supersedes competence; in campaign rhetoric, where appeals to ethnic solidarity and religious identity substitute for policy debate; and in political conduct, where governing coalitions are frequently organized as ethnic patronage networks rather than ideological partnerships.

The 2023 presidential election demonstrated both the persistence and the contested nature of ethnoreligious political communication. The candidacy of Peter Obi of the Labour Party, which attracted significant cross-ethnic and cross-religious youth support organized under the "Obidient" movement, represented a partially successful challenge to prevailing identity-based framing, with many supporters explicitly articulating a preference for policy-based political choice. Yet ethnoreligious mobilization remained dominant among the major parties, with significant documented deployment of religious incitement in the electoral communication of both the APC and the PDP (CDD-West Africa, 2023).

5.3 Legislative Communication and Public Accountability

The National Assembly occupies a constitutionally central role in democratic communication, providing a public deliberative forum through which legislative priorities are debated, government conduct is scrutinized, and citizen concerns are represented. Analysis of National Assembly debates reveals a mixed communicative record.



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Budget appropriation debates have grown more substantive since the early 2000s, with increasing legislative engagement with sectoral allocations and public finance management. Committee hearings have occasionally provided valuable public accountability functions, as in the fuel subsidy probe of 2012 and various NDDC investigations.

However, floor debates are frequently characterized by personal attacks, partisan grandstanding, ethnic posturing, and the deliberate obfuscation of policy substance. The phenomenon of "absentee legislators"—members who collect constituency allowances while rarely engaging in legislative debate—reflects a conduct failure that is enabled and reinforced by a communication culture that rewards public performance over substantive deliberation. The recurring controversies over legislative remuneration, in which legislators defend opaque salary packages with minimal public justification, illustrate the accountability deficit in legislative communication.

5.4 Executive Communication and Narrative Management

Presidential and gubernatorial communication has evolved significantly with the digital age, but often in ways that prioritize narrative management over transparency. Government communication offices have grown in size and sophistication, deploying professional public relations expertise to shape favorable media narratives and respond to criticism. This development has generated both positive and negative democratic implications.

On the positive side, executive communication has become more regular and multi-channel, with presidents and governors increasingly using social media to communicate directly with citizens. On the negative side, government communication frequently employs what Van Dijk (1993) terms "positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation"—emphasizing government achievements while deflecting responsibility for failures onto predecessor administrations, external actors, or opposition sabotage. The strategic use of security concerns to restrict press access to government information, documented by the Nigerian Press Council and the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria, further constrains the communicative accountability of the executive.

6. POLITICAL CONDUCT AND DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Electoral Conduct and Democratic Legitimacy

Electoral conduct, the behavior of political parties, candidates, security agencies, and electoral management bodies during elections, is the most immediate interface between political practice and democratic legitimacy. Nigeria's electoral history since 1999 has been marked by significant conduct deficits: electoral violence that has claimed thousands of lives across the country's electoral cycles; vote buying and inducement that has transformed elections into commercial transactions rather than expressions of political preference; manipulation of voter registration, result collation, and announcement processes; and the deployment of security forces in ways that intimidate voters and suppress opposition turnout. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has implemented successive technological reforms aimed at improving electoral conduct, including the introduction of biometric voter registration, smart card readers, and the BVAS (Bimodal Voter Accreditation System) in 2023.



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These reforms represent important progress in reducing conduct-based fraud in accreditation processes, though the 2023 election revealed that result transmission manipulation remained a significant challenge (EU EOM, 2023). The conduct of security agencies, particularly allegations of partisan deployment of military and police during elections, continues to undermine the credibility of electoral outcomes and the democratic communication that elections are meant to facilitate.

6.2 Corruption, Governance Conduct, and Trust Deficits

Corruption constitutes perhaps the most damaging conduct failure for Nigerian democracy because of its systematic contradiction of democratic communication. When politicians communicate commitments to public welfare while diverting public resources for private enrichment, the communicative basis of democratic accountability is fundamentally undermined. Citizens learn through experience that political communication is performative rather than constitutive, that it describes a world of democratic governance that does not exist, and adjust their political behavior accordingly, retreating from civic engagement into clientelistic exchange or political disengagement.

The Nigerian governance literature documents pervasive corruption across all tiers of government, from federal ministry budget padding and procurement fraud to local government salary ghost workers and community fund diversion (Ijewereme, 2015; Okeke, 2022). The EFCC and ICPC have secured hundreds of convictions since their establishment, but prosecutions remain selective and politically inflected, undermining the rule of law norms essential for democratic conduct. The phenomenon of "stomach infrastructure", the distribution of food items and cash in exchange for electoral support, illustrates how conduct patterns actively communicate to citizens that governance is a transactional rather than a public service relationship.

6.3 Interparty Relations and Norms of Democratic Competition

Democratic consolidation requires that political parties accept each other as legitimate competitors and commit to peaceful transfers of power when electoral outcomes are unfavorable. Nigeria's inter-party relations have been characterized by significant deficits in this regard, with losing parties frequently disputing electoral outcomes through litigation, violence, or defection rather than accepting democratic verdicts and organizing for future competition. The high rate of cross-carpeting, politicians switching parties between and within electoral cycles, often in exchange for political appointments, reflects a political culture in which party identity is instrumental rather than ideological, undermining the communicative function of party platforms as public commitments to governance programs.

The 2015 election, in which President Jonathan conceded defeat to Muhammadu Buhari in a direct and timely telephone call, was widely celebrated as a landmark moment of democratic conduct, precisely because it was so unusual in the Nigerian context. The peaceful transfer of power communicated powerful democratic norms to citizens and regional observers. Conversely, the conduct controversies surrounding the 2019 and 2023 elections, disputed results, court challenges, and allegations of security force deployment, communicated uncertainty about democratic norms that eroded the legitimacy gains of 2015.



6.4 Legislative-Executive Relations and Democratic Balance

The constitutional design of Nigerian democracy requires productive tension between the executive and legislative branches as a safeguard against executive dominance. Yet the history of the Fourth Republic reveals persistent imbalances, with the National Assembly frequently either captured by executive patronage or engaged in politically motivated obstruction rather than substantive legislative oversight. The conduct of budget deliberations, in which the National Assembly has repeatedly introduced what critics term "padding" (insertion of fictitious or low-priority projects) and delayed appropriations, illustrates how legislative conduct can undermine rather than reinforce democratic governance communication.

At the same time, the legislature has periodically demonstrated independence: the 2023 rejection of several executive nominees for security positions, the legislative inquiries into NDDC and NNPC management, and the constitutional review processes have all provided forums for communicating legislative oversight priorities. The conduct and quality of these processes remains uneven, but they represent important democratic resources that deserve institutional support and reinforcement.

7. THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE: OPPORTUNITIES AND PATHOLOGIES

7.1 Social Media and Democratic Participation

Nigeria's digital public sphere has grown dramatically over the past decade, driven by increasing smartphone penetration, expanding mobile internet access, and a young and demographically expanding population with strong digital communication habits. With over 33 million active social media users as of 2023 (NCC, 2023) and WhatsApp penetration estimated at over 90% of smartphone users, digital platforms have become primary sites of political communication for millions of Nigerians, particularly in urban areas.

The democratic potential of this development is real and documented. Social media enabled the #EndSARS movement of 2020, one of the most significant youth-led political mobilizations in Nigerian history, to organize protest actions, document police brutality, document and counter government misinformation, and communicate directly with international audiences. The movement demonstrated that digital political communication can bypass traditional gatekeepers, aggregate citizen grievances, and generate political pressure that forces institutional response. The Obidient movement of the 2023 election cycle similarly demonstrated the capacity of digital communication to build cross-ethnic political coalitions and challenge entrenched political structures.

7.2 Disinformation, Hate Speech, and Democratic Risks

The same digital infrastructure that enables democratic mobilization also facilitates conduct that undermines democracy. The Dubawa Nigeria and Africa Check fact-checking platforms have documented that false information constituted a significant proportion of viral political content during the 2023 election campaign—including fabricated videos attributed to prominent candidates, manipulated polling data, and coordinated ethnic incitement campaigns. Research by the Centre for Democracy and Development and SBM Intelligence identified organized networks of political actors deploying paid "influence operations" to manipulate political discourse on social media platforms.



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The implications for democratic communication are profound. When the information environment is saturated with disinformation, citizens face increasing difficulty distinguishing authentic political communication from strategic manipulation, undermining the deliberative capacity that democratic legitimacy requires. The viral spread of content inciting ethnoreligious violence—documented before and after the 2023 elections in several states—illustrates how digital political communication can produce physical conduct consequences that directly threaten democratic stability.

7.3 Platform Governance and Democratic Responsibility

The governance of digital platforms in Nigeria remains inadequate relative to the scale of democratic risks they generate. Meta (Facebook/WhatsApp/Instagram), Twitter/X, and TikTok maintain limited content moderation capacity in Nigerian languages and contexts, relying primarily on automated systems that frequently fail to detect local incitement and coordinated inauthentic behavior. The Nigerian government's response has been ambivalent: the 2021 Twitter ban, which suspended the platform for seven months following the removal of a presidential post, communicated government hostility to digital accountability rather than responsible platform governance.

Constructive platform governance for democratic communication requires a different approach: transparent content moderation standards, investment in local language moderation capacity, meaningful engagement with Nigerian civil society and fact-checking organizations, and regulatory frameworks that balance freedom of expression with accountability for harmful content. The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) and the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC) are developing frameworks for digital content governance, but implementation remains at an early stage.

8. THE PCCD FRAMEWORK: A REFORM ARCHITECTURE

Drawing on the theoretical foundations developed in Section 2 and the empirical analysis of Sections 5 through 7, this paper proposes the Political Communication-Conduct-Democracy (PCCD) Framework as both an analytical tool for understanding democratic quality and a prescriptive architecture for democratic reform. The framework posits that sustainable democratic strengthening in Nigeria requires simultaneous reform across four interconnected dimensions: communicative integrity, conduct accountability, institutional reinforcement, and civic empowerment.

8.1 Communicative Integrity

The first dimension of the PCCD framework addresses the normative quality of political communication. Communicative integrity requires that political actors make truthful, verifiable, and substantive communications to citizens; that media institutions maintain editorial independence and journalistic standards; and that digital platforms enforce meaningful standards against disinformation and incitement. Institutional mechanisms for communicative integrity include: mandatory campaign finance disclosure linked to media spending; legally enforceable campaign communication codes that prohibit hate speech, ethnic incitement, and demonstrably false factual claims; independent media regulatory bodies with genuine enforcement authority; and publicly funded fact-checking partnerships with civil society organizations.



8.2 Conduct Accountability

The second dimension addresses the structural mechanisms through which political conduct is held accountable to democratic standards. Conduct accountability requires that violations of democratic norms, electoral fraud, abuse of incumbency, corruption, political violence, carry consistent, credible, and non-partisan consequences. This requires judicial independence capable of adjudicating election petitions without political interference; an anti-corruption enforcement regime that prosecutes across partisan lines; security sector conduct standards that prohibit partisan deployment of state coercive power; and mechanisms for civil society and citizen monitoring of political conduct with access to administrative redress.

8.3 Institutional Reinforcement

The third dimension recognizes that political communication and conduct are shaped by institutional incentive structures. Institutional reinforcement requires reforms that realign incentives within political institutions toward democratic conduct. Key reforms include: strengthening INEC's operational independence and funding security; introducing mixed-member proportional representation elements to reduce the winner-take-all dynamics that drive extreme political competition; reforming campaign finance laws to reduce the role of money in politics; and establishing constitutional protections for legislative independence that reduce executive dominance of the legislative agenda. The conduct of political parties as internal democratic organizations is also essential: primary elections that are genuinely competitive, inclusive, and free from executive interference can significantly improve the quality of democratic representation.

8.4 Civic Empowerment

The fourth dimension addresses the demand side of democratic communication. Civic empowerment requires that citizens have the knowledge, skills, and organizational capacity to participate meaningfully in democratic deliberation, critically evaluate political communication, and hold political conduct to account. This dimension includes: media literacy and digital citizenship education integrated into the national curriculum; support for civil society organizations that conduct civic education, voter education, and governance monitoring; expansion of participatory governance mechanisms at local government level; and legal protections for freedom of assembly, association, and press that create enabling conditions for civic engagement. The demonstrated capacity of Nigerian youth to organize digitally around democratic demands—as evidenced by #EndSARS and the Obidient movement—represents a civic asset that institutional reforms should seek to channel into sustained democratic participation.

9. DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in this paper confirms and elaborates the relationship between political communication, political conduct, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The theoretical framework developed in Section 2 predicted that democratic quality would correlate with the alignment between communicative commitments and political conduct; the empirical analysis of Sections 5 through 7 demonstrates that chronic misalignment between democratic rhetoric and anti-democratic conduct is a defining feature of Nigerian political practice, with significant consequences for citizen trust, institutional legitimacy, and the viability of democratic governance.



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The PCCD framework's four dimensions—communicative integrity, conduct accountability, institutional reinforcement, and civic empowerment—address different but interrelated aspects of this challenge. It is important to recognize their interdependence: communicative integrity reforms without conduct accountability leave the enforcement gap that has historically allowed political actors to communicate democratic commitments while violating democratic norms with impunity. Conduct accountability without institutional reinforcement creates fragile reforms that are susceptible to reversal when political incentives shift. And both communicative and conduct reforms require civic empowerment to generate the sustained public demand that makes them politically sustainable.

The digital dimension deserves particular emphasis in any forward-looking analysis of Nigerian democratic communication. The trajectory of digital platform penetration in Nigeria suggests that digital spaces will become increasingly central to political communication over the coming decade. This makes the governance of digital political communication—including platform accountability, disinformation response, and digital civic literacy—a first-order democratic priority rather than a secondary concern. The opportunity represented by Nigeria's young, digitally engaged population to build a more substantive and participatory democratic public sphere is real, but it requires proactive institutional action to realize.

The comparative dimension also deserves attention. Nigeria's democratic communication challenges are not unique: the literature documents comparable patterns of ethnoreligious framing, political conduct deficits, and digital misinformation in other developing democracies including Kenya, Indonesia, India, and Brazil. However, successful democratic communication reforms in countries including Ghana, Botswana, and South Africa—including independent electoral commissions, credible inter-party conduct codes, and strong civil society media monitoring capacity—suggest that reform is achievable and that regional learning can accelerate its progress. Nigeria's size and influence within West Africa gives its democratic communication reform potential significance beyond its borders.

10. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has examined the role of political communication and political conduct in shaping democratic governance in Nigeria. Drawing on deliberative democracy theory, framing theory, and political culture analysis, it has argued that the chronic misalignment between democratic communicative commitments and actual political conduct represents a fundamental challenge to democratic consolidation.

The paper has analysed patterns of electoral communication, legislative and executive discourse, ethnoreligious framing, digital political communication, electoral conduct, corruption, and interparty relations to demonstrate how this misalignment manifests across multiple dimensions of Nigerian political life. The proposed PCCD framework offers an integrated reform architecture addressing communicative integrity, conduct accountability, institutional reinforcement, and civic empowerment.



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On the basis of this analysis, the following recommendations are advanced for political actors, institutions, civil society organizations, media institutions, and development partners:

1. Political parties should adopt and publicly commit to enforceable Codes of Political Conduct that prohibit ethnic incitement, vote buying, electoral violence, and disinformation in campaigns, with independent monitoring by civil society organizations and meaningful sanctions for violations.
2. The National Broadcasting Commission and the Nigerian Press Council should develop and enforce comprehensive Political Communication Standards applicable to broadcast and digital media, including mandatory political advertising transparency, right-of-reply provisions, and restrictions on demonstrably false factual claims.
3. INEC should be granted full operational independence through constitutional amendment, including financial autonomy, security of tenure for commissioners, and direct parliamentary rather than executive appointment of leadership.
4. The National Assembly should enact a comprehensive Campaign Finance Reform Act establishing per-candidate spending limits, mandatory disclosure of all contributions above a defined threshold, and independent oversight of compliance.
5. Anti-corruption prosecution should be institutionally restructured to ensure operational independence from executive influence, including a merit-based appointment process for EFCC and ICPC leadership with parliamentary confirmation and fixed, non-renewable terms.
6. The Federal Ministry of Education should integrate media literacy and digital citizenship into the National Curriculum from secondary school level, equipping young Nigerians with skills to critically evaluate political communication and identify disinformation.
7. Digital platform companies operating in Nigeria should be required, through legislation, to invest in local-language content moderation, publish transparent content governance policies, engage with Nigerian fact-checking organizations, and submit to annual audits of content moderation effectiveness by an independent regulatory body.
8. Civil society organizations conducting political communication monitoring, voter education, and governance accountability functions should receive institutionalized public funding through an independent Civic Society Support Fund, reducing dependence on volatile international donor cycles.
9. A National Democratic Communication Observatory should be established as an independent research and monitoring institution documenting trends in political communication quality, electoral conduct, and democratic governance performance, generating annual public assessments that inform reform priorities.
10. Future research should investigate the microfoundations of political communication reform—examining how individual political actors respond to changes in communication norms and conduct accountability mechanisms—and should employ longitudinal designs to assess the democratic consolidation effects of specific communication and conduct reforms over time.



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