Despotism in the Twenty-First Century: The Case of Nigeria's Democratic Despotism

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Introduction

Despotism and democracy are increasingly becoming so indistinguishable that scholars often treat despotic governments as democratic, even when those governments are formed through controversial elections and when they spin democratic institutions—such as the press and the judiciary—to suit their tyrannical motives (Doorenspleet and Nijzink 2012; Khodaverdian 2022; Resnick 2014). Unfortunately, this analytical conundrum endures because of the persistent failure in the literature to recognize the difference between government and governance. While government is about ruling over people or controlling people, governance focuses on people ruling with one another through the rules that they spontaneously develop on the basis of their creativity, interests, and values (Ostrom 1994) that are not "ever being concentrated in a single mind, or being subject to those processes of deliberate coordination and

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adaptation which a mind performs" (Hayek 1973, pp. 41–42). In fact, the scholarly ambiguity has become more complicated in West Africa since the 1990s when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund deployed foreign aid promises to induce national governments in West African countries to decentralize powers to the constituent sub-national governments. In pursuit of the masked despotic goal of the two Bretton Woods institutions, national governments in West African countries, including Nigeria, embraced the unqualified decentralization prescription by devolving powers to deliberately designed regional and local governments for up-close control of ordinary individuals who, unfortunately, are treated as lacking the creativity to govern (Andersson and Ostrom 2008; Ayo 2002).

Since West Africa rang in the twenty-first century, despotism has relentlessly maintained its *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* as the instrument of controlling people through the exercise of arbitrary, unchecked centralized power by tyrannies of different shades (Gellar 2005). Sheldon Gellar (2005) has provided an excellent description of the single-party system of despotism in Senegal. Following the 2022 coup d'état in Burkina Faso, the terrain in West Africa where democratic despotism has been deliberately switched back to full-blown military dictatorship expanded to include about 1300 miles of territory. The West African countries under military rule include Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, and Mali (Paquette 2022). Nigeria, the most populous African country, is considered a twenty-first century West African democracy. What has not been carefully analyzed, however, is how Nigeria's current democracy is nothing but democratic despotism by which national and regional governments rule over the Nigerian people and, at the same time, disregard the primacy of people's creativity, interests, and values as the basis of governance. In fact, the Nigerian national government operates as the final authority over the Nigerian people. What is more, the ambiguously defined powers extended to the Nigerian state and local governments have only resulted in gaining more control over the people.

Despotism in Nigeria has also thrived on what Alexis de Tocqueville (1969) calls selfish individualism by which people focus exclusively on themselves and refuse to govern with others in balancing public good and private interest or pursuing "self-interest properly understood."

Tocqueville (1969) warns that selfish individualism may condemn political systems to despotism when people engage in the personal pursuit of wealth—materialism—even if they must give up their freedom for control by a despotic ruler. Unfortunately, national and regional despots in Nigeria, steeped in what Tocqueville (1969) identifies as selfish individualism and materialism, have crippled the independence of the judiciary and the press, corrupted elections, resisted dissent, and taken corruption to an all-time high in the personal pursuit of wealth. This chapter, therefore, draws upon the frequently obscured analytical differences between government and governance to dissect despotism in twenty-first century West Africa, using the poorly understood case of Nigeria's democratic despotism.

Democratic despotism is the illusion that people govern when it is the ruling elite who exercise the final authority (Tocqueville 1969) and, at the same time, manipulate democratic procedures in their favor (Guriev and Treisman 2022). The configurational perverseness of democratic despotism incentivizes the ruling elite to break the law, corrupt democratic elections, silence the media and distort information, arm-twist the judiciary, resist dissent, and decentralize and recentralize power. The 2021 father-to-son power transfer in Chad, the 2021 Malian coup d'état for democratic reform, the 2022 Burkina Faso coup d'état for democratic security, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia epitomize the twenty-first century threat of despotism to self-governance. In systems of democratic despotism, the hegemony of legislative power (Tocqueville 1969) and/or executive-run administrative states (Christensen 2021, pp. 429–430) also raises fundamental concerns about how the tyranny of the majority can usher in and solidify the reign of tyranny (Treisman 2007) as well as stymie an international order of law that, according to Hayek (1948), can otherwise unite all societies and individuals as coequals. In addition, the unqualified decentralization of power, which the Bretton Woods institutions have aggressively sponsored in West Africa, has the potential to stimulate regional despotism (Maddox 1941).

As despotic governments in the twenty-first century proclaim themselves as democratic and use democratic institutions to undermine democracy (Guriev and Treisman 2022), one important dilemma

remains in Nigeria and other West African countries: if West African peoples, using Vincent Ostrom's (1994, p. 5) words, "rely only upon the pronouncements of those who aspire to leadership, democracy will be universally proclaimed—a form of demagoguery, not democracy." Such pronouncements by West African despots are problematic because, without the institutions of democratic self-governance, self-styled free West African countries cannot have what Tocqueville (1969, p. 63) calls "the spirit of liberty." This chapter draws upon these important insights to analyze democratic despotism in the West African country of Nigeria. In doing so, a detailed review of despotism perspectives is first undertaken before discussing the origins and manifestations of despotism in West Africa. It then examines the key features of democratic despotism in Nigeria.

Despotism Perspectives

The illegitimacy of despotism has penetrated political thoughts for centuries. Plato (2003) and Aristotle (1995) unfold despotism as a perverted form of rule-ordered relationships in which the interests of a usurper downgrade people to unwilling subjects. In pursuit of the security of the commonwealth, the despot rules without the consent of the people and may break the law by using force to squash opposition and secure compliance from the people (Machiavelli 1998). An unanswered question, however, turns upon why people are so dangerous to themselves that they need an undivided and unlimited despot. Hobbes (1991) addresses this challenge in *Leviathan* by turning attention to the state of nature in which people individually exercise unlimited freedom and disregard the social bonds and civic duties that can force people to pursue their own interests and, at the same time, consider the interests of others. The Hobbesian state of nature degenerates into a war of all-against-all as individuals violently attempt to lord over each other. The fear of all-against-all—or the despotism of all-against-all—therefore, necessitates despotism by an undivided and unlimited sovereign power to whom individuals must submit to break out of the insecurity of the state of nature. People are then stuck with the oxymoron of an anti-despotic

despot seeking to use despotism to destroy despotism. The Hobbesian view underlies the modern-day centralization of power by which public affairs are conducted in self-styled free societies with reference to a single center of power controlled by some despot(s). It is presumed that the greater the state power captured by the despotic central government the more it can build mutual trust among diverse individuals and ensure peace and prosperity in an efficient and uniform manner (Wilson 1956, p. 203). This assertion has nurtured military rule and democratic despotism in West Africa since Africa fell under the foreign despotism of the Bretton Woods institutions. Contrary to expectations, West Africa is today ravaged intolerably by terrorism and banditry, poverty and unemployment, and poor infrastructural development. The dilemma appears to have no end in sight because of tightly knit groups of despots who run West African countries and resist the creativity, interests, and values of their respective citizens as the foundation of democratic self-governance.

Generally, the political thoughts of Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Hobbes on despotism have come under intense scrutiny. Nevertheless, these thinkers offer important insights into how despotism and democratic self-governance are contradictory in terms. Despotism, unlike democratic self-governance, strips people of sovereignty and vests final authority in rulers. However, these political thoughts are unclear about how democratic self-governance may slide into despotism. Herein lies the important contribution of Tocqueville about the forces that may push democratic self-governance into despotism, which are the sovereignty of legislative power and the hegemony of the executive branch as well as an excessive desire for equality, individualism, and materialism. The desire for absolute equality derives from selfish individualism by which people focus exclusively on themselves and refuse to work together voluntarily in associations to balance public good and private interest or to pursue "self-interest properly understood." Individualism may also incentivize people to engage in the personal pursuit of wealth—materialism—even if they must give up their freedom for control by a despotic ruler. Democratic self-governance may, therefore, slip into despotism when people become too individualistic (Tocqueville 1969). Concentrating too much power in the legislative body or the executive branch may also clear the

way for despotism (Christensen 2021), especially in the absence of effective checks on these bodies (Tocqueville 1969, p. 252) that emerge from the creativity, interests, and values of the people (Hayek 1973). These despotic threats can cripple republican liberty or the practice of self-governance because "without local institutions a nation may give itself free government, but it has not got the spirit of liberty" (Tocqueville 1969, p. 63).

In dealing with democratic despotism, Tocqueville suggests cures such as local self-governance, an independent judiciary, freedom of association, and a free press. Local interests tend to vary and cannot be uniformly addressed. When people have control over their local affairs, tremendous possibilities present themselves for direct participation by people in democratic self-governance. While an independent judiciary may serve as a check on the tyranny of the majority, a free press may prevent the same challenge by keeping people informed about politics and motivating them to exercise their freedom to participate in politics and hold public officials to account. The freedom of association may curb selfish individualism as people work together in associations to balance public and private interests based on their creativity and values (Ostrom 1994) that are not "ever being concentrated in a single mind, or being subject to those processes of deliberate coordination and adaptation which a mind performs" (Hayek 1973, pp. 41–42).

Tocqueville's emphasis on decentralization, however, draws no distinction between self-governance and self-government, even though Tocqueville clearly relates decentralization to local self-governance. As recently noted by Christensen (2021, p. 442), the lack of distinction has created confusion in empirical studies, resulting in a debatable assertion that "decentralization can be just as despotic or predatory as centralized hierarchical government" and "efforts at decentralization can actually lead to a recentralization of power if self-government is not the ultimate aim of such measures." The obscured question this provokes turns upon whether self-government and self-governance, as well as decentralization, are always conterminous and whether they similarly lead to despotism. Ostrom (1994, p. 5) navigates this challenge by clarifying that government "is plainly not the people" because government denotes the centralization of power for the sole purpose of ruling over people.

Since government is ruling over people, self-government implies ruling over people without interference from the people, as opposed to self-governance which is about people governing with one another. What is also obvious is that centralization of power by the central government gives the central authority the status of self-government, while lower-level governments tend to gain self-government status through decentralization of power. Decentralization of power for local self-government then requires that power must first be centralized in a central government before a part of the power is devolved to the constituent lower-level governments to achieve greater control of the people (Olowu 1989, p. 203).

Generally, decentralization of power has unfolded as unqualified decentralization (Elazar 1991; Osaghae 1990), which despotic central governments use to create the illusion that people govern when the actual intention is to expand despotic control over the people (Olowu 1989). When a despotic central government disperses powers to lower-level governments but fails to gain greater control over the people, the central authority may at any time reclaim those powers. In addition, the decentralized jurisdictions or local self-governments may become decentralized tyrannies over the people since the decentralized jurisdictions are indebted to the centralized authority for their self-government status, rather than to the people within the decentralized jurisdictions. Local self-government officials, as selfish individualists and materialists, may be better off pursuing personal gains if they isolate themselves from the people in the shifting politics of clientelism and patronage between the despotic central government and local self-government officials. Consequently, local self-government, which is ruling over people without interference from the people in decentralized jurisdictions, demonstrates how decentralization of power or unqualified decentralization may hide the true intentions of the central authority for more control over the people (Olowu 1989, p. 202) and may, in the process, spur regional and local despotism (Christensen 2021). At the same time, centralization and decentralization tend to reinforce each other in infusing the entire political system with despotism and justifying the need for elites to modernize their societies "without hindrance from the mass of the people who must be cajoled and "mobilized" for "development"" (Olowu 1989, p. 204).

On the other hand, self-governance is people governing with one another who, as coequals, develop their own rules to organize their relationships with one another, mediate and moderate conflicts, facilitate cooperation, and deal with public policy problems in ways that fit both their circumstances and the scale of public policy problems (Ostrom 2010a). Self-governance tends to prevent the dilemma of despots ruling over people because of its focus on the primacy of people's interests, creativity, and values (Aligica 2018, pp. 5–11) that are not "ever being concentrated in a single mind, or being subject to those processes of deliberate coordination and adaptation which a mind performs" (Hayek 1973, pp. 41–42). The prospect of "societies achieving self-governance" or achieving people governing with one another "depends…upon the emergence of patterns of polycentricity" or polycentric governance "that might apply to the whole system of human affairs" (Ostrom 1994, p. 3).

To be sure, polycentric governance neither has a place for unqualified decentralization nor necessarily implies the absence of a central authority. Instead, polycentric governance involves a multiplicity of functionally interdependent and overlapping decision centers that interact at multiple levels within a system of overarching rules, laws, norms, and/or shared values (Ostrom et al., 1961; Pahl-Wostl and Knieper 2014). The key features of polycentric governance then include multiple decision centers, the autonomy of decision-making authority for each decision center, overlapping jurisdictions among decision centers, multiple levels of interactions among decision centers, an overarching system of rules, and coordination mechanisms such as mutual adjustment by decision centers to one another (Ostrom et al., 1961; Stephan et al., 2019). When decision centers operate as territorial power bases, their territory cannot be altered without the consent of the people within the respective jurisdictions of those centers (Elazar 1991; Wheare 1963). Non-centralization of power, therefore, allows for qualified decentralization as a tool of horizontal and vertical cooperation, by which decision centers may decentralize responsibilities to other decision centers and recentralize those tasks without usurping the decision-making authority of the constituent decision centers, unlike unqualified decentralization (Elazar 1991; Osaghae 1990). Decision centers are not necessarily uniform but can vary in size and type and interact horizontally and/or vertically through processes

of cooperation, competition, conflict, and conflict resolution (Ostrom 1994, p. 225). Diverse decision centers can work together horizontally and/or vertically to plan and provide mutually beneficial services (McGinnis and Ostrom 2011) by communicating with each other as well as by mobilizing and sharing resources (Koontz and Garrick 2019). Interdependence and overlap among decision centers arise inevitably from services and functions that affect more than one decision center in "endless shifting configurations of competition and collaboration" that prevent long-term control of decision centers by central and local despots (McGinnis et al., 2020, p. 3). Therefore, functional interdependence and overlap at multiple levels would make it necessary for decision centers to interact with each other at multiple levels while making their own decisions (Stephan et al., 2019).

As evidence has shown, polycentric governance provides people with multiple means of mediation and moderation to address and improve policy outcomes. However, studies have acknowledged that "we cannot have the best of all possible worlds" (Ostrom 1994, p. 3) because "no governance system is perfect" (Ostrom 2010a, p. 552). As a result, there may be despotism in some decision centers within a system of polycentric governance when local tyrannies seize control of those decision centers for their private benefits. Local tyrannies may be dominant groups and/or local leaders "who only change rules that they think will advantage them" (Ostrom 2005, p. 282). However, these threats of despotism, unlike in other forms of governance, tend not to be systemwide because polycentric governance systems exhibit duplication and redundancy that in turn generate backup mechanisms to reduce the vulnerability of the whole system of polycentric governance to despotism (Ostrom et al., 1961). Overall, "polycentric systems have considerable advantages given their mechanisms for mutual monitoring, learning, and adaptation of better strategies over time" (Ostrom 2010a, p. 552).

This chapter draws upon these important insights to analyze the twenty-first century manifestations of despotism in West Africa, with the case of democratic despotism in Nigeria. Emphasis is placed on centralization and decentralization, democratic elections, the judiciary,

the media, and polycentric governance. The origins of foreign despotism in West Africa are discussed first before an examination of the twenty-first century manifestations of democratic despotism in Nigeria.

Origins of Foreign Despotism in West Africa

In the late 1950s, West African countries came under the despotism of the International Monetary Funds and the World Bank. The two Bretton Woods institutions have fostered regional despotism in West Africa, especially through their sponsorship of unqualified decentralization. Nevertheless, standard narratives show that foreign despotism in West Africa began with European colonial regimes in the late nineteenth century. Britain and France were two major colonial powers in West Africa. French colonies in West Africa included Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Senegal. Ghana and Nigeria were among the British colonies. The imperialists froze diverse groups into the colonies. For example, the French imperialists merged diverse groups, such as Mossi, Fulani, Lela, and Nuni, into Burkina Faso, while homogenous groups, such as Bobo, Bwa, Marka, and Senufo, were callously split between Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, and Niger. The European imperialists slashed the Kanuri between Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. Igbo, Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, and many other African groups were frozen into Nigeria by the British colonial power. The same brutal fate played out with the other African groups that were merged into or split between West African colonies (Adefuye 1985; Saul and Royer 2001).

Before the advent of colonialism, the diverse African groups in the West African colonies, however, had developed diverse governance institutions with varying degrees of success. As evidence has shown, the diverse groups in the West African countries spontaneously grew culturally sensitive rules by which they developed participatory decision-making units, monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms, easily accessible conflict resolution methods, clearly defined citizenship rights, and the rights of diverse individuals and groups to make and modify rules (Ayittey 2006; Niang 2014). In growing governance systems, these pre-colonial governance practices were intricately nested within

multiple layers of decision-making units—families, villages, towns, cities, provinces, and kingdoms. This does not mean that there were no threats of despotism in the pre-colonial political orders. In some pre-colonial African settings, natives denied landowning and political rights to individuals and groups characterized as strangers, setting off a citizen-stranger dichotomy in those communities (Oyerinde 2019). However, threats of despotism were not widespread because there were polities that were open to the accommodation of newcomers. As a result, individuals, who became dissatisfied with their pre-colonial communities, usually exercised exit options by moving to other places where they were integrated as equal citizens (Ayittey 2006; Mamdani 2005; Olowu 1996; Zeleza 2008).

Following the creation of West African colonies, however, foreign despotism was set loose in ways never experienced before in the region. As Europeans competed with each other for territory and sovereignty in Africa, they deprived the diverse groups in the colonies of the right to make and modify governance rules and destroyed "old methods of conflict resolution" (Mazrui 2008, p. 37) as well as removed "all the traditional institutions of checks and balances on local chiefs" that matched local circumstances (Olowu 1996, p. 13). As a substitute, the imperialists arbitrarily imposed centralized governmental arrangements, by which the diverse African peoples were inhumanely brought to colonial heel. In setting the scene for the Hobbesian state of nature, colonial leaders, who were unaccountable to the people (Ayo 2002, p. 5), launched full-blown violence against the recalcitrant African groups that tried to continue with their self-governance mechanisms (Oyerinde 2019, p. 994). Uncooperative groups—such as Bobo, Bwa, and Marka in Mali and Burkina Faso; Lela and Nuni in Burkina Faso; Tuareg in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger; and Kanuri in Chad, Niger, and Nigeria—resisted by engaging in violent opposition against the colonial administration (Saul and Royer 2001; Weate 2014). In forcing compliance from the Africans, the French colonial despots treated the black population in southern Mali and the Mossi in Burkina Faso as more privileged subjects than the other constituent groups (Chauzal and Damme 2015). Similarly in Nigeria, the British colonialists elevated the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba groups over other groups and, as a result, initiated hatred between the

constituent groups. At the same time, the colonial despots permitted submissive communities to operate their decision-making units, as long as the interests of those Africans did not conflict with those of the colonial dictators (Ayo 2002; Zeleza 2008).

Drenched in what Tocqueville calls selfish individualism and materialism, African leaders inherited the colonial architectures of despotism when the colonies obtained independence from their respective European masters. The despotic paraphernalia has provided the flourishing platform on which African leaders have run military rule and democratic charades to control their respective populations. The International Monetary Funds and the World Bank have buoyed up these despotic tendencies through their sponsored programs, including the decentralization programs of the 1990s. Since independence, successive political leaders have rejected successful pre-colonial institutions of self-governance "as a viable instrument for promoting social and economic development, based on the assumptions that these institutions are incongruous with development" (Ayo 2002, p. 11). Instead, these leaders retain the colonial despotic mindset by which they treat their citizens as immature and needy children who must be supervised and given orders. Consequently, political leaders in West African countries closely mimic the despotic behavior of their colonial predecessors in ruling over their respective peoples and in tipping the scales strategically against the demands of repressed groups for self-governance.

As distinct as West African countries are, their respective political landscapes are as much drenched in despotism in the twenty-first century as during the period stretching from the arrival of the colonial powers to the close of the twentieth century. Through the instrumentality of military and democratic despotism, African political leaders, like their colonial predecessors, "divide and conquer rather than encourage entrepreneurial initiatives" (Ayo 2002, p. 13). Between 1960 and 2001, for example, military dictators ruled over four West African countries for 23 to 35 years: 35 in Burkina Faso, 27 in Chad, 23 in Mali, and 29 in Nigeria. Except for Nigeria, the military dictatorship in the other three countries, up to the end of the twentieth century, was mixed military-civil despotism because some of the military heads of government metamorphosed

themselves into civilian political leaders. Since the start of the twenty-first century, mixed military-civil despotism has persisted in Burkina Faso (2001–2015 and 2022 to date), Chad (2001 to date), Guinea (2008–2010 and 2021 to date), and Mali (2020 to date).

While Nigeria has been under democratic despotism since 1999, Burkina Faso (2015–2022) and Mali (1992–2007 and 2012–2020) have had some interrupted stints of democratic shams since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Contrary to the Hobbesian view of peace under an undivided and unlimited despot, these countries rang in the twenty-first century with so much turmoil that "there is fighting across borders as separated groups try to unite, there is fighting within borders as forcibly united groups search for separation and independence, and the only thing these groups can agree on is their anger at Europe for having thrust such borders upon them" (Feldman 2009, p. 359). The discussion that follows focuses on how despotism has persisted and thrived in Nigeria, especially through centralization and decentralization of power, corrupt democratic elections, arm-twisted judiciaries, suppressed media, and the lack of polycentric governance.

Democratic Despotism in Twenty-First Century Nigeria

The twenty-first century phase of despotism in Nigeria began in 1999 with an illegitimate constitution deliberately designed by the Abdulsalami Abubakar military administration (1998–1999). The backdrop to the transformation was the increasingly waning popularity of military rule that forced the military and civilian elite to a demilitarization process that would adorn military despotism with a civilian outfit. In whipping up the new constitution as a representation of the creativity, interests, and values of all Nigerians, the military set up a constitution debate coordinating committee (CDCC) and tasked the committee to gather information for the constitutional process. Under the strict guidance of the military, the committee of legal and constitutional experts fulfilled its deliberate mission by designing the 1999 constitution on sampled public opinion from 9 out of over 500 Nigerian cities. As expected, the legal

framework is not constitutive of diverse Nigerians' interests, values, and creativity that, to borrow Hayek's words, are not "ever being concentrated in a single mind, or being subject to those processes of deliberate coordination and adaptation which a mind performs" (1973, pp. 41–42). In fact, the information-gathering technique was skewed against most individuals and groups from the sampled cities in favor of the penchants of the military and civilian elites to control the Nigerian people. At the same time, the residents of the constituent towns and villages were completely shut out of the entire exercise (Adeyemi and Yahaya 2022). The undemocratic approach to constitutional design clearly shows that the intended constitution would establish despotic governmental structures for ruling over Nigerians, rather than democratic self-governance by which Nigerians could rule with one another. As undemocratic as the drafted constitution was, the military adopted the document on the basis of which the despotism-to-despotism transition successfully switched military dictatorship to democratic despotism on May 29, 1999. As a result, the twenty-first century Nigerian political landscape has been characterized by centralization and decentralization of power, an arm-twisted judiciary, corrupt democratic elections, a shackled press, limited freedom of association, and the lack of polycentric governance.

The 1999 constitution recognizes Nigeria as a federation and upholds the national government as the final authority ruling over all Nigerians. The Nigerian federation, as enshrined in the 1999 constitution, consists of a national government, 36 state governments, and 776 local governments. Effectively glued by successive military leaders to the colonial status of immaturity in need of supervision and control by the national government, ordinary Nigerians were mystified and powerless players when the national government created and uniformly structured the sub-national governments at various times under military rule between 1966 and 1996. In creating the sub-national governments, the military treated self-governance institutions in Nigerian towns and villages as antithetical to development (Ayo 2002). As a continuation of despotic tendencies, the 1999 constitution centralizes the most important legislative and executive powers in the national government. Those powers cover services that vary in quality and quantity with diverse regional and local circumstances, such as police, marriage, business registration, and education.

Nevertheless, the constitution upholds the national government as the final despotic authority over the Nigerian people because Section 4(5) of the constitution provides that "if any law enacted by the house of assembly of a state is inconsistent with any law validly made by the national assembly, the law made by the national assembly shall prevail, and that other law shall, to the extent of the inconsistency, be void" (Nigerian Constitution 1999).

Section 4(5) of the constitution appears to emphasize the preponderance of the national assembly or legislature over the entire country. However, the executive branch of the national government predominates through its firm grip on anti-corruption agencies, the military, the federal Nigeria police, and an elaborate petrodollar network of patronage. The Nigerian police is the only police force for the entire country and is under the direct control of the Nigerian president as the head of the national executive branch. In a bizarre and blatant display of tyrannical power in the spirit of what Alexis de Tocqueville calls selfish individualism, the national executive branch has successfully deployed its national security agencies to force state legislatures to impeach state governors in such states as Adamawa (Governor Murtala Nyako in 2014), Anambra (Governor Peter Obi in 2006), Bayelsa (Governor Diepreye Alamieyeseigha in 2005), Ekiti (Governor Ayo Fayose in 2006), Oyo (Governor Rashidi Adewolu Ladoja in 2006), and Plateau (Governor Joshua Dariye in 2006). The embattled governors were considered the political enemies of the sitting president. Unfortunately, the states are anemic because the state and local governments depend disproportionately on petrodollar revenue that the national government uses to subordinate the subnational governments. Similarly, national legislators in opposition to the president, such as former senate president Bukola Saraki (2015–2018), have had costly legal brushes with national security agencies on allegations that were later dismissed as fabricated (Busari 2018; Lawan 2010; Suberu 2017).

Ordinary Nigerians have not been spared from the despotic behavior of the national executive branch drenched in selfish individualism by which the national executive branch has refused to govern with the Nigerian people. For example, the arrival of COVID-19 in Nigeria in April 2020 was brutally met with repressive lockdowns during which the

Nigerian police killed more Nigerians than COVID-19 did in the early part of the pandemic (BBCNews 2020). In addition, many more Nigerians lost their lives to police shootings in October 2020 when protesters demanded the dissolution of the Nigerian Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious police unit accused of torture, extortion, and murder (George 2020). While the behavior of the national executive branch and democratic self-governance are contradictory in terms, the tyrannical role of the national executive clearly confirms the tendency of democratic despots to shunt aside the "liberties proclaimed in constitutions affirming the rights of man" (Gellar 2005, p. 44) and resort to force as a more effective strategy for ruling over their citizens (Ostrom 1997).

As evidence has shown, excessive concentration of power in the Nigerian national government has inflicted despotism on Nigeria. On the other hand, state and local governments have had their own share of tyrannical behavior within their respective decentralized jurisdictions. As earlier discussed, the sub-national governments were created by military despots and gained their status as sub-national self-governments under the 1999 constitution that ambiguously gives them some powers that were once concentrated in the national military government. In principle, the national and state governments concurrently exercise power on issues, such as rural electrification, post-primary education, and agricultural development. At the same time, all residual powers are constitutionally under the purview of the state governments. However, "there are hardly any policy areas that can be described as truly exclusive to the states" (Suberu 2017, p. 296) because Section 4(5) of the constitution bars the state governments from making policies and laws that are inconsistent with those of the national government. Local governments are ambiguously placed simultaneously under the national and state governments. Amusingly, Section 1(3) of the constitution recognizes the autonomy of local governments as a third level of government. However, local government autonomy is imperiled under Section (7[1]) that empowers the state governments to provide "for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions" of local governments (Nigerian Constitution 1999).

Despite the ambiguous status of local governments, the decentralization of power for gaining more control over Nigerians, as guaranteed

in the constitution, has no place for the people as the final authority over state and local governments. As a result, the decentralized subnational governments, whose *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* were shaped by the Bretton Woods Institutions' decentralization programs of the 1990s, have operated as decentralized jurisdictions of despotism. As a blatant show of untamed materialism, local government officials often loot their government treasuries with reckless abandon through a harem of phantom workers as well as the award of hyper-inflated contracts that are often fully paid for upfront but later abandoned (Page and Wando 2022). Patron-client networks, which spill across the three governmental levels, have facilitated unchecked corruption at the local level. Many elected local government chairmen usually hold their offices at the mercy of powerful patrons or godfathers within their local and state jurisdictions. Among those godfathers are state governors who, without consultation with the people in the affected local jurisdictions, have arbitrarily removed "non-compliant" local government chairmen from office, in much the same way the national government has unleashed tyranny on state governments (Suberu 2017, p. 318). What is not in question is that such consultation is constitutionally unwarranted because the three governmental levels derive their existence and powers as self-governments—ruling without interference from the people—from the 1999 constitution deliberately designed by military despots who successfully had condemned ordinary Nigerians to the status of immature and needy subjects in need of supervision (Ayo 2002). Herein lies the despotic motivation of state governors to pursue personal political gains by disregarding the people within their respective jurisdictions and by manipulating local government elections to have their cronies in charge of the local governments within their respective states (Ibeanu 2008; Majeed 2021).

Clearly, democratic despotism in Nigeria is not limited to the manipulation of local government elections. The anomalies are frequently evident in the conduct of party primaries and general elections at the three constitutionally recognized governmental levels (Suberu 2017). In local congresses, political party members are required to elect delegates who, as the voices of their respective party members, nominate party candidates who will compete for elective national and state government

positions in the next election cycle. However, the selfish individualism and materialism identified by Tocqueville have gained foothold to the point that political party primaries are so monetized that party delegates' support for a candidate often depends largely on how much the candidate can satisfactorily offer to bribe party delegates. Organizers of local party congresses have also been accused of replacing elected delegates or generating lists of delegates without conducting congresses (Oko 2022). Unfortunately, vote-buying dramas have backfired. For example, a prominent politician requested the 30 delegates he had bribed to return about 76 million naira (about $180,000) after the politician lost the party ticket for a federal constituency. In fact, former President Goodluck Jonathan and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have condemned party primaries as messy, corrupt, and democratically aberrant (Daily Trust Reporters 2022).

As far as general elections are concerned, ordinary Nigerians are often saddled with the demeaning electoral duty of exercising periodic referenda on local, regional, and national despots who controversially survive their respective primaries. These despots, especially members of the ruling parties in national and state governments, usually consider it their legitimate right to use government treasury to benefit their client-patron networks during general elections that are frequently boycotted by many Nigerians. In fact, the president oversees a massive petrodollar system of clientelism that benefits the supporters of the president. In addition, national and state legislators have a lot of power and money at their disposal because of their enormous salaries and benefits. Apart from their salaries and benefits, state governors are at liberty to spend a huge monthly security vote—or funding for state security—from the national government. Much of the security vote is often used to influence electoral outcomes (Adekoya 2019; Suberu 2017). Even though 39.1% of Nigerians lived below the international poverty line of $1.90 per person per day in 2018/19 (Vishwanath 2021), each 2022 presidential candidate form was purchased at 40 million naira (about $100,000) and 100 million naira (about $250,000), respectively, from the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC), the two dominant national political parties. Unfortunately, economically

vulnerable Nigerians remain beholden to these national and decentralized despots for livelihood. During general federal elections that are often marked by low voter turnout (30–45%) and deadly violence, politicians usually exploit the vulnerability of ordinary Nigerians (Adekoya 2019), in addition to the use by the national ruling political party of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to manipulate electoral results in favor of its national and regional candidates (Human Rights Watch 2011, p. 26; Suberu 2017, p. 296). By and large, democratic elections in Nigeria, since 1999, has not proceeded beyond political party formation, rigging and winning elections, and wealth capture by tyrants (Ilo 2021), echoing the warning that "if democracy has an essential place in the unfolding of human civilization, the part that people play in the governance of societies must turn upon much more than voting in elections" (Ostrom 1994, p. 5).

The lack of independence for the judiciary is another important twenty-first century manifestation of democratic despotism in Nigeria. To be clear, the 1999 constitution recognizes the judiciary, the executive, and the legislature as three distinct government branches at the national and state levels. The supreme court is the highest court in the federation, which is a part of the national judiciary branch. Evidence shows that the national judiciary has acted as a relatively independent mediator in the highly centralized federation, sometimes daring the overbearing power of the national executive branch by giving relatively fair rulings in favor of the factional and political opponents of the executive branch. Such cases have included the invalidation of the impeachment of some state governors in which the national government had played an unconstitutional role (Suberu 2017, p. 322). In addition, the national executive branch through Nigeria's central bank redesigned the banknotes of 200, 500, and 1000 and required Nigerians to hand in the old notes between October 2022 and January 2023. Interestingly, the new notes were released in December 2022. The opposition challenged the deadline before the Nigerian apex court as too short for Nigerians to return the old banknotes. Ruling in favor of the opposition on March 3, 2023, the supreme court extended the deadline till December 2023, "berated President Muhammadu Buhari for not obeying a previous provisional order to halt the policy until it decided the case," and declared that "disobedience

of order of court shows the country's democracy [is] a mere pretension and now replaced by autocracy" (Orjinmo 2023).

While much is yet to be understood about the relative fairness of the national judiciary in those cases, the national executive branch has greatly ridiculed the national judiciary by refusing to obey court rulings and by deploying national anti-corruption and security agencies after national judges who are deemed corrupt. For example, the Buhari-led national executive branch has shunned over 40 court rulings that were against its political agenda (Osasona 2021). In another attack on the national judiciary, national security agencies conducted sting operations in October 2016 in which seven serving national judges were arrested allegedly for corruption. In addition, some national judges have received warnings from the national executive branch for ethical violations, while other unfortunate judges have been recommended for dismissal (Onyekwere 2018). At the state level, state governors use fiscal power to subjugate state courts (Suberu 2017, p. 301). Most recently, the immediate past chief justice of Nigeria resigned on June 27, 2022, allegedly on health grounds. However, the resignation drama suddenly played out amid serious corruption allegations from 14 supreme court justices against the chief justice who was the target of an ongoing investigation by the national legislature (Azu and Bamgboye 2022; Omogbolagun 2022).

Despotic tentacles have shackled not only the judiciary but also the Nigerian press, both print and broadcast media. Interestingly, Section 39(2) of the 1999 constitution protects freedom of the press. For democracy to thrive, a free press has an important role to play in informing citizens about politics and motivating them to exercise their freedom to participate in politics and hold public officials to account. Yet the Nigerian press has been in chains for being critical of the national government. In fact, journalists have been arrested and brutalized by the Nigerian police. For hostile publications against the national government, for example, "police raided editorial offices and arrested employees of press organizations including the *Daily Independent*, the *News*, and the *Observer* during the 1999–2003 democratic dispensation" (Akinwale 2010, p. 51). In the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, the national government banned Twitter for seven months and demanded media organizations to dissociate themselves

from Twitter because Twitter deleted the president's tweets threatening protesters campaigning against incessant police brutality in the country (Wodu 2021).

There is a tendency, however, to think that democratic despotism has partly evolved into a system of polycentric governance in Nigeria because horizontal and vertical interactions, which are not specifically stated in the 1999 constitution, occur between the three governmental levels (Ahovi 2022; Nigeria Governors' Forum, n.d.). One instrument of such interactions is the association of local government chairmen (ALGON), by which local government chairmen engage in horizontal and vertical interactions. ALGON was created in 1999 as an amalgamation of the state chapters formed under military rule. The mission of ALGON includes local government autonomy and engagement with national and state governments on matters of interest to local governments. ALGON interacts with national and state governments on dealing with common interests (Ahovi 2022). For example, the increasing insecurity of life and property throughout Nigeria has compelled the national legislature to seek the support of ALGON. Similarly, state governors have regional and national associations through which state governors interact informally with one another and with national and local governments (Nigeria Governors' Forum, n.d.).

It is important to acknowledge that the associations of local government chairmen and state governors emerged from the voluntary action of their respective members. What is also obvious is that members engage in self-governance by governing with one another and developing their own rules to structure their interactions. However, these associations do not exist for the interests of ordinary Nigerians. As earlier explained, local government chairmen and state governors are local and state despots using their respective positions to further Tocquevillian interests (individualistic and materialistic) at the expense of ordinary Nigerians relegated to the status of immature subjects in need of supervision. On the other hand, the associations of local government chairmen and state governors operate freely provided they do not infringe on the supremacy of the national government with which the national judiciary has mostly sided as the final authority and to which the state and local governments

are beholden for financial support. Indeed, the sub-national governments are extremely weak in generating their own revenue and, as a result, depend disproportionately on fiscal allocations from the crude oil revenue controlled by the national government (Suberu 2017). The choking environment of the associations of local government chairmen and state governors demonstrates how polycentric self-governance may be paralyzed within a despotic system (Thiel and Moser 2019, p. 71).

The resultant poor governance in twenty-first century Nigeria has escalated suspicion of domination among the constituent ethnic groups and fueled increasing clashes between the national security forces and ethnicity-based security outfits as well as escalated unrelenting pressures for the disintegration of Nigeria (Agboluaje 2021). This is in addition to growing interregional tensions shambolically complicated by Boko Haram—the world's deadliest terror group—that has unpityingly killed tens of thousands of people and displaced 2.3 million from their homes since 2002 (Chinwokwu and Michael 2019; Otu and Nnam 2018). In addition, public services are provided in declining quality and quantity, while corruption has spiraled out of control. Basic water services are very scarce, let alone erratic electricity supplies and deplorable road conditions. It is troubling that police officers and military personnel are sometimes indistinguishable from armed robbers and bandits as well as terrorists. More importantly, many employees are poorly paid in Nigeria. In 2018, the percent of the Nigerian population living on less than $5.50 per day was 92% (World Population Review 2021). Indeed, hospitals have become places to go and die for many Nigerians. Aso Rock Clinic, which offers health care services to the Nigerian president and presidential staff, has been deserted for poor performance. As a result, the Nigerian president goes to Europe for medical vacations (Daka 2020). Overall, democratic despotism, contrary to the predictions of Hobbes and Wilson, has not translated into prosperity and security for the Nigerian people in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Despotism remains as much a serious plague in twenty-first century West Africa as it was during the colonial era up unto the start of the new century. Yet despotic political systems, such as Nigeria, are considered democratic even when these governments are formed through controversial elections and when the despots in charge spin democratic institutions to suit their individualistic and materialistic interests at the expense of the primacy of people's interests, innovations, and values as the foundation of governing arrangements. As clearly explained in this chapter, the confusion turns upon the failure to differentiate between government—or ruling over people—and governance—or people ruling with one another, with the former conterminous with despotism. With this distinction, this chapter has demonstrated how Nigeria's current democracy legitimizes despotism and disregards the primacy of people's interests, creativity, and values as the basis of governance.

Democratic despotism in oil-rich Nigeria has unleashed rampant individualism, materialism, and widespread corruption, entrenching regional and national tyrannies. This has deepened the mutually destructive ethnic divisions in citizenship, politics, and identity. At the same time, the national and regional governments have crippled the judiciary, stifled the press, corrupted elections, suppressed dissent, and driven corruption to unprecedented levels. The despotic model has severely undermined Nigeria's prospects for genuine self-governance. As Nigeria continues to navigate the twenty-first century, it is obvious that, without the institutions of democratic self-governance, the people of the West African country cannot have the spirit of liberty. It is, therefore, important for Nigeria and other West African countries to try to learn something more useful from pre-colonial institutions of self-governance, such as detailed by Oyerinde (2022), that largely reined in despotism and enabled people to rule with one another through the rules that they developed based on their creativity, interests, and values.

In fact, the Nigerian national government operates as the final authority over the Nigerian people.

Unfortunately, the ambiguously defined powers extended to the state and local governments in Nigeria have only resulted in gaining more

control over the people. Consequently, national and regional despots in Nigeria have crippled the independence of the judiciary and the press, corrupted elections, resisted dissent, and taken corruption to an all-time high. Clearly, the experience of Nigeria has proven to be overwhelmingly damaging to self-governance. As Nigeria continues to navigate the twenty-first century, it is obvious that, without the institutions of democratic self-governance, the people of the West African country cannot have the spirit of liberty. It is, therefore, important for Nigeria and other West African countries to try to learn something more useful from precolonial institutions of self-governance, such as detailed by Oyerinde (2022), that largely reined in despotism and enabled people to rule with one another through rules that they developed on the basis of their creativity, interests, and values.

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