

**POPULISM, PROTEST, AND POLITICAL ORDER IN NIGERIA: A BURKEAN REFLECTION ON  
THE LIMITS OF RADICAL CHANGE**

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**Abstract**

Since it returned to democratic rule in 1999 after protracted period of military regimes, Nigeria has experienced reoccurring waves of political activism, populist movements and public demands for rapid political and economic transformation. Ranging from nationwide protests against corruption, police brutality and security challenges to secessionist agitations and calls for restructuring, the country faces heightened pressure for political transformation. This study interrogates these challenges within the framework of Edmund Burke's social and political theory. Writing in a context similar to Nigeria's current political climate characterized by strong popular demand for political transformation, Burke emphasizes the importance of tradition, prudence, and gradual reform in maintaining social and political stability. He warned against the dangers of radical and sudden changes, arguing that political institutions and customs embody accumulated wisdom essential for societal cohesion. Using the library method and hermeneutics for data collection and analysis respectively, the study applies Burke's insights to explore the risks posed by populist agitation and hurried political reforms to democratic governance, institutional integrity, and national unity. The paper finds that while public demands for change are legitimate, they must be moderated with prudence and respect for established institutions to ensure peace and sustainable governance. It concludes by highlighting not just the importance of Burke's ideas in diagnosing Nigeria's political challenges but also in proposing viable pathways for achieving stable and enduring political development.

**Keywords:** Populism, Political Protest, Burkean Philosophy, Political Stability, Democratic Governance and Nigeria

**Introduction**

Nigeria, the giant of Africa, has been witnessing in recent years a dynamic and often turbulent interplay of political activism, populist movements, and public protest. From the nationwide #EndSARS demonstrations in 2020, which mobilized millions against police brutality, to recurring agitations over corruption, regional autonomy, and governance reforms, the country's political landscape is defined by citizens' persistent demands for accountability and rapid transformation (Omotola, 2021; Akinola, 2020). These agitations, while reflecting legitimate demands, also highlight tensions between progressivism and conservatism, raising pressing questions about the capacity of the Nigerian state to accommodate reform without destabilizing established structures.

Political stability is specifically important in Nigeria due to its multi-ethnic composition, federal structure, and historical legacies of centralized governance. As Obi (2019, p. 42) contends, "In deeply plural societies, political stability is not merely a policy goal; it is the *sine qua non* of democratic survival." The fragility of institutions, combined with competing ethno-regional interests, amplifies the stakes of any radical or abrupt reform. This is why, scholars of political philosophy and social theorists have consistently emphasized that societies navigating rapid social change require careful balancing of liberal impulses with the preservation of institutional wisdom (Burke, 1790/2018).

Therefore, the central research question guiding this study is: How can Nigeria balance popular demands for reform with institutional continuity? This question is rooted in the observation that, while populist agitation can catalyze necessary reforms, untamed radicalism can undermine the very structures that sustain democratic governance and national cohesion. As Burke (1790/2018, p. 47) warned:

Society is indeed a contract... but the state ought not to be the mere instrument of the majority; it is the trustee of the entire society, including the unborn generations.

This Burkean foundation frames the philosophical lens of the paper as it highlights the tensed nexus between urgent demands for change and the enduring value of prudence, incrementalism, and institutional memory. Consequently, the objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To examine the nature and dynamics of political activism, populism, and protest in contemporary Nigeria.

2. To analyze the risks and opportunities these movements pose to democratic governance, and national unity.
3. To apply Burkean political philosophy as a normative framework for assessing the limits of radical change and the imperatives of institutional continuity.

Methodologically, the study employs the library method to collect data from academic publications, policy documents, historical records, and credible media sources, complemented by hermeneutic analysis to interpret these materials critically within their socio-political contexts. Contemporary Nigerian case studies, including #EndSARS protests, agitation for regional restructuring, and recurrent policy debates, are deployed to demonstrate how theoretical insights intersect with practical political realities, offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between reform and stability.

To provide a coherent framework for analysis, this study is schematized into seven sections. Following this introduction, Section two examines Edmund Burke and the philosophy of prudence, exploring the historical and intellectual foundations of his thought, key concepts such as respect for tradition, gradualism, and critique of radical change, and the relevance of his ideas to contemporary governance. Section three surveys populism and protest in contemporary Nigeria, highlighting major movements, regional and ethnic demands for restructuring, and the tensions between public agitation and institutional constraints. The fourth section applies a Burkean analytical lens to Nigerian politics, particularly evaluating the risks of sudden reforms and the stabilizing role of constitutional and institutional traditions. The risks of ignoring prudence, including threats to institutional integrity and national unity were discussed in section five, while the sixth section offers recommendations for gradual reform and political stability, underscoring the need for participatory governance, context-sensitive reform, and strengthening of public trust. Finally, section seven concludes the study by summarizing key arguments, reflecting on the enduring relevance of Burke's philosophy, and considering implications for scholars, policymakers, and civic actors.

### **Edmund Burke and the Philosophy of Prudence**

Edmund Burke (1729–1797), an Anglo-Irish statesman, political theorist, and philosopher is one of the most influential figures in the study of prudence and political order. His political philosophy emerged in the context of the volatile social and political transformations of the eighteenth century, including the American Revolution, which he supported, the French Revolution, which he opposed and debates over British imperial governance (Kelly, 2018). Burke's articulations were deeply rooted in a conservative understanding of society as an organic and evolving entity, shaped by historical experience and accumulated wisdom rather than abstract rationalist principles (Burke, 1790/2018).

Burke's philosophy is notable for its insistence that political institutions embody the lessons of past generations, and that reform must respect this inherited wisdom. As Gamble (2017, p. 34) observes, "For Burke, society is not a mechanical construct to be redesigned at will; it is a living, historical organism whose norms and institutions reflect centuries of collective experience." This emphasis on continuity and caution positions Burke as a theorist of prudential reform, offering critical insights into the limits of abrupt revolutionary changes. The appreciation of a number of key terms are necessary in understanding the core ideas in Burke's philosophy.

### **Key Concepts in Burkean Political Philosophy**

#### **Respect for Tradition and Inherited Institutions**

At the center of Burke's thought is the notion that traditions and institutions are repositories of accumulated social wisdom. He argued that political change should not occur through abrupt innovation, but rather through careful preservation of what has proven functional and morally coherent over time. Burke (1790/2018, p. 46) argues that, "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation." Here, he underscores a dual responsibility: society must adapt to new circumstances, but reforms must honor the continuity of institutions that sustain civic stability. Scholars have emphasized that this principle is not merely conservative inertia but a practical recognition of complexity in human societies, where the sudden overthrow of established practices often produces unintended consequences (O'Flaherty, 2019).

#### **Gradualism and Prudence in Political Reform**

Closely linked to his respect for tradition is Burke's principle of gradualism. According to Burke, reforms should be incremental, cautious, and contextually grounded, rather than revolutionary in scope. He argued that prudence—a moral and political virtue—requires policymakers to consider the long-term effects of change, balancing immediate demands against enduring institutional integrity. As Gamble (2017, p. 38) notes, "Prudence, for Burke, is the practical judgment exercised in the service of social cohesion; it is the art of navigating change without sacrificing order."

This principle has particular relevance for contemporary states facing populist pressures and widespread agitation, where hasty or sweeping reforms may destabilize governance structures. By advocating measured reform, Burke provides a framework for navigating the tension between popular demands and institutional continuity, a tension that is vividly observable in modern pluralistic societies such as Nigeria.

### **Critique of Radical Change and Revolutionary Upheaval**

Burke's critique of radicalism is most famously articulated in his reflections on the French Revolution. He claims that sudden and ideologically driven reform often leads to social dislocation, violence, and institutional collapse. In his seminal work, Burke (1790/2018) maintain that "The people never give up their liberties but under some delusion" (p. 55), and further warned that, "Revolutions, in which abstract rights are substituted for established customs, almost invariably produce disorder and tyranny" (p. 59). Modern scholarship has interpreted this as a cautionary principle: popular movements, however legitimate, must be channeled through existing institutions to avoid the pitfalls of radicalism (Kelly, 2018; O'Flaherty, 2019). Burke's critique extends beyond France, offering enduring lessons on the fragility of political systems under the pressure of unchecked populist agitation.

### **Relevance of Burkean Thought to Contemporary Governance**

Burkean prudence offers a valuable analytical lens for understanding contemporary political challenges, particularly in multi-ethnic, federal states like Nigeria. The country's recurring protests, demands for restructuring, and populist mobilizations echo the dynamics Burke warned against: the temptation of rapid, radical change without due regard for institutional constraints. By emphasizing gradualism, prudence, and respect for tradition, Burke provides a normative framework for evaluating how reforms can be implemented without compromising political stability, institutional integrity, or national unity (Obi, 2019; Omotola, 2021).

In practical terms, applying Burkean insights to Nigeria suggests that policymakers must carefully balance popular demands for reform with the structural wisdom embedded in the constitution, legal frameworks, and bureaucratic processes. As Gamble (2017, p. 42) asserts, "Prudence does not oppose change; it governs it. It ensures that the zeal for reform does not destroy the very structures that sustain society." Thus, Burkean philosophy serves as both a diagnostic and prescriptive tool, enabling scholars and practitioners to critically assess the risks of radical reform and the conditions under which incremental, carefully managed change may be socially and politically sustainable.

### **Populism and Protest in Contemporary Nigeria**

#### **Overview of Recent Nigerian Protest Movements**

Nigeria has a long history of public protest. However, the protest landscape in recent years has been reshaped by dynamic civic mobilizations expressing broad discontent with governance failures, socioeconomic inequality, and systemic abuses of state power. Central to this new era of protest was the nationwide #EndSARS movement of 2020, which emerged from longstanding grievances against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigerian Police Force accused of pervasive brutality and impunity (Aderinto, 2021; Olaniyan & Raheem, 2024). Scholars describe #EndSARS as more than a campaign against police abuse; it is "one of the largest youth protests in Nigeria's recent history," linking police reform with calls for accountability, transparency, and structural change (Wada, 2021, p. 9).

The movement's success was significantly facilitated by digital platforms, especially Twitter. Social media enabled decentralized coordination, emotional engagement, and rapid diffusion of information that bypassed traditional gatekeepers of political discourse. As Adedokun (2022, pp. 441–442) argues, social media was pivotal not merely as a tool for communication, but "a strategy for protest movements" that mobilized citizens and unified youth across Nigeria for causes demanding systemic reform. He elaborates:

The #EndSARS campaign represented a transformation in Nigerian civic engagement, wherein digital networks facilitated unprecedented levels of coordination and public expression. Far from being a spontaneous eruption of discontent, the movement was grounded in collective identity formation, shared experiences of state violence, and a unified demand for accountability across multiple sectors of society. It was not solely about police brutality but a broader critique of governance and socio-political exclusion. In this context, social media acted as both a mobilizing force and a space for collective meaning-making, bridging disparate locales and constituencies into a cohesive protest front.

#### **Regional and Ethnic Movements Calling for Political Restructuring**

Alongside nationwide movements like #EndSARS, localized and ethnically grounded mobilizations have intensified demands for political restructuring within Nigeria's federal system. Separatist and autonomy

movements—particularly the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast and Ilana Omo O’odua (IOO) in the Southwest—underscore longstanding perceptions of marginalization and asymmetrical access to political power and economic resources (Adesanya, 2023). Although these movements vary in ideology and tactical approach, they share core grievances rooted in relative deprivation and historical inequities. Adesanya (2023, p. 24) observes:

Such agitations invoke the principle of self-determination as an instrument to justify their demands, challenging the conventional boundaries of Nigerian statehood and raising fundamental questions about the legitimacy and adaptability of the federal arrangement.

These regional movements demonstrate that protest in Nigeria is not monolithic; instead, it reflects a spectrum of contestations over identity, governance, and the distribution of power. They compel scholars and policymakers to grapple with the persistent national question: how to reconcile unity with diversity in a polity marked by deep historical cleavages.

### **Rise of Populist Leaders and Public Agitation for Immediate Change**

Contemporary Nigerian politics has been influenced by leaders who employ populist rhetoric to amplify public dissatisfaction and mobilize support. Populism’s appeal lies in framing politics as a binary conflict between “the people” and entrenched elites, promising immediate reforms that resonate with citizens frustrated by systemic inertia. This dynamic occurs in tandem with grassroots protest movements, creating complex interactions between institutional elites and civic constituencies. As Olaniyan and Raheem (2024, p. 164) note:

Populist leadership and mass protest can reinforce one another when perceived elite failures fuel public agitation, yet also generate tension when political actors co-opt protest narratives to legitimize their agendas.

A contemporary example of this dynamic is the rise of Peter Obi and the #Obidient movement during the 2023 presidential elections. The movement drew heavily on the political consciousness cultivated during the #EndSARS protests, translating civic activism into electoral engagement. While Obi himself did not explicitly position as a populist, his appeal was rooted in public frustration with established elites, bureaucratic inefficiency, and the slow pace of reform. Scholars argue that:

The #EndSARS protests of 2020 contributed to the popularity and support for the Obidient movement, as the grievances expressed—demands for accountability, transparency, and structural reform—resonated strongly with a newly mobilized electorate eager for immediate political change. (Jegade, 2025, p. 327)

This case illustrates how populist rhetoric can intersect with public protest to produce tangible political outcomes, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges of popular mobilization in Nigeria’s democratic context.

### **Tensions between Public Demands and Institutional Constraints**

Despite the energy and scale of contemporary protests, significant tensions persist between public demands and the structural capacities of Nigerian institutions. Institutional constraints—such as rigid bureaucratic processes, limited judicial responsiveness, and weak enforcement mechanisms—often slow or blunt the impact of popular demands, contributing to cycles of mobilization and state repression (Enyiazu, 2023). Enyiazu (2023, p. 23) elaborates:

Protest movements in Nigeria expose profound contradictions within the country’s democratic framework. While citizens exercise their constitutional right to peaceful assembly and free expression, state responses have routinely revealed gaps in legal protections and systemic fragilities. Oftentimes, institutional mechanisms intended to mediate conflict—such as judicial review, legislative oversight, and executive accountability—are too slow, fragmented, or politically compromised to provide meaningful redress. In this sense, the tensions between public demands and institutional constraints highlight the broader challenge of legitimizing democratic institutions in contexts marked by deep distrust and historical neglect.

These tensions were starkly visible during the state’s handling of the #EndSARS protests, particularly the Lekki Toll Gate incident in October 2020, where security forces’ actions against unarmed demonstrators sparked domestic and international condemnation. Scholars contend that the state’s reliance on coercion rather than substantive engagement with protest demands underscores the limitations of institutional responsiveness in moments of acute public dissent (Olaniyan & Raheem, 2024, p. 168).

The interplay between populist leadership, regional movements, and nationwide protests in contemporary Nigeria highlights both the vibrancy of civic engagement and the constraints of institutional responsiveness. While

movements such as #EndSARS and the rise of populist figures like Peter Obi demonstrate the capacity of citizens to demand accountability and immediate reform, persistent structural limitations and political inertia reveal the challenges of translating public agitation into sustainable institutional change. Understanding these dynamics is essential for examining how governance, policy responsiveness, and citizen participation intersect in shaping Nigeria's evolving political landscape.

### **Applying Burkean Analysis to Nigerian Politics**

#### **Burke's Warnings against Radical Disruption in the Nigerian Context**

Edmund Burke's philosophy emphasizes caution, prudence, and respect for inherited political institutions as safeguards against societal upheaval. His critique of radical disruption and revolutionary zeal remains highly relevant to Nigeria, where abrupt reforms or populist-driven mobilizations can generate instability. Burke (1790/1987, p. 58) argued that "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation", suggesting that reform must be gradual, measured, and grounded in established institutional frameworks. In Nigeria, the lessons of Burke caution against precipitous political or social interventions that bypass procedural and constitutional norms, even when motivated by legitimate public grievances.

Analysts have noted that the fervor of movements like #EndSARS, while morally and politically compelling, also carries the potential to exacerbate social tensions when state mechanisms are unprepared to respond effectively (Aderinto, 2021; Olaniyan & Raheem, 2024). Burkean prudence thus provides a framework for balancing moral imperatives for justice with the practicalities of governance and institutional stability.

#### **Case Studies: Abrupt Reforms and Local Governance Disruption**

Several Nigerian episodes illustrate the destabilizing consequences of rapid reforms or protest-driven interventions. For example, the 2016 fuel subsidy removal protests led to nationwide strikes and violent demonstrations, disrupting local governance and public service delivery. Scholars argue that the abruptness of policy implementation—without adequate institutional cushioning or phased transition—intensified public dissatisfaction and weakened trust in state institutions (Okonjo-Iweala, 2017). Similarly, the Lekki Toll Gate incident during the #EndSARS protests demonstrated how sudden mass mobilizations can overwhelm existing governance structures, creating both human and institutional crises. As Olaniyan and Raheem (2024, p. 164) observe:

The sudden escalation of the #EndSARS protests revealed the Nigerian state's vulnerability to rapid civic mobilization. Local governance structures were unprepared for mass demonstrations, and attempts at intervention often relied on coercive measures rather than structured engagement with citizen demands. This mismatch between public agitation and institutional readiness underscores the risks of abrupt societal change.

#### **Nigerian Constitution and Institutional Traditions as Stabilizing Mechanisms**

Burke's philosophy underscores the stabilizing role of inherited institutions in guiding political life. In Nigeria, the constitution and established governance traditions function as mechanisms to balance public demands with societal continuity. The 1999 Constitution enshrines checks and balances across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, providing procedural safeguards to mediate conflicts and guide reforms. These institutions are designed to ensure that citizen demands are addressed through lawful channels, mitigating the risks of precipitous disruption. For example, judicial review and legislative oversight serve as procedural buffers, allowing grievances—from electoral disputes to policy dissatisfaction—to be addressed within institutional frameworks. This aligns with Burkean prudence, which emphasizes incremental change and respect for established procedures to maintain order and legitimacy.

#### **Balancing Legitimate Public Demands and Political Prudence**

Applying Burkean analysis to Nigeria requires navigating the tension between legitimate public demands for accountability and the need for cautious governance. While civic engagement, protest movements, and populist appeals signal genuine societal concerns, policymakers must temper immediate responsiveness with consideration for institutional stability. As Aderinto (2021, p. 1901) notes:

Citizens' demands for reform are vital for democratic legitimacy, yet responding without due regard for institutional capacities can precipitate unintended consequences. Prudence entails recognizing the temporal and structural limitations of governance while fostering avenues for meaningful, sustainable change.

This balance is particularly relevant in contexts where public pressure intersects with fragile governance structures. Gradualist reforms, guided by constitutional principles and informed by civic input, reflect the Burkean ideal of measured progress that avoids destabilizing shocks while respecting citizen agency.

A Burkean reading of Nigerian politics underscores the necessity of reconciling urgent public demands with the imperatives of institutional stability and gradual reform. While protests and populist pressures remain vital expressions of democratic engagement, their long-term effectiveness depends on alignment with constitutional processes and prudent governance. This balance between change and continuity is essential for sustaining both political order and democratic legitimacy in Nigeria.

### **Risks of Ignoring Prudence**

#### **Institutional Fragility and Governance Challenges**

A central tenet of Burkean political thought is the warning that the abandonment of prudence in governance can lead to the erosion of institutional stability. In the Nigerian context, where political institutions are still consolidating, a disregard for gradualism and procedural restraint poses significant risks. Institutional fragility is often manifested in weak policy implementation, inconsistent adherence to the rule of law, and the politicization of governance structures. Scholars argue that rapid, poorly coordinated reforms—especially those driven by populist pressures—can overwhelm already strained institutions, thereby undermining their capacity to function effectively (Diamond, 2008; Suberu, 2010). Burke (1790/1987, p. 76) cautions against the dangers of dismantling established systems without adequate foresight, emphasizing that:

The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught a priori. Nor is it a short experience that can instruct us in that practical science; because the real effects of moral causes are not always immediate... Time is required to produce that union of minds which alone can produce all the good we aim at.

This insight is particularly relevant for Nigeria, where the impatience for immediate transformation often collides with the slow, complex realities of institutional reform. The erosion of administrative continuity and the frequent disruption of policy frameworks illustrate how neglecting prudence can weaken governance structures and reduce public trust in the state.

#### **Threats to National Unity in a Diverse Federal System**

Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition makes national unity both a necessity and a persistent challenge. Ignoring prudence in managing political change risks exacerbating existing fault lines, particularly when reforms or political rhetoric fail to account for the delicate balance of interests within the federation. As Suberu (2010) notes, federal systems like Nigeria's require careful negotiation and incremental adjustments to maintain cohesion among diverse groups.

Populist narratives that frame politics in binary terms—"the people" versus "the elite"—can inadvertently deepen divisions by oversimplifying complex socio-political realities. In a heterogeneous society such as Nigeria, such rhetoric risks alienating minority groups and intensifying regional grievances. This is evident in the proliferation of separatist agitations and identity-based movements, which often gain momentum in contexts where political processes are perceived as exclusionary or abrupt reforms disrupt existing arrangements (Osaghae, 1998). The Burkean perspective thus emphasizes the importance of preserving social harmony through cautious and inclusive governance. Abrupt or unilateral reforms, even when well-intentioned, may trigger resistance and conflict, thereby undermining the very unity they seek to strengthen.

#### **Potential for Unintended Consequences from Radical Reforms or Populist Pressures**

One of the most significant risks of ignoring prudence is the emergence of unintended consequences from radical reforms or populist-driven policy decisions. In Nigeria, policy shifts undertaken without adequate consultation, planning, or institutional support have often produced outcomes contrary to their original objectives. For instance, abrupt economic reforms—such as subsidy removals or currency adjustments—have frequently led to inflationary pressures, public unrest, and diminished trust in government (Okonjo-Iweala, 2017, p. 143). Burke's skepticism toward radical change is rooted in the recognition that complex societies cannot be easily reengineered without unforeseen repercussions. As he observes:

Because half-a-dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink... whilst thousands of great cattle... are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field.

This metaphor underscores the danger of overestimating the representativeness of vocal groups, a phenomenon particularly relevant in the age of social media-driven activism. In Nigeria, highly visible protest movements or populist campaigns may amplify specific grievances while obscuring broader societal complexities, leading policymakers to adopt reactive measures that fail to address underlying structural issues. Moreover, the pressure for immediate results can incentivize short-term policy decisions at the expense of long-term sustainability. Enyiazu (2023) argues that such dynamics often result in cyclical patterns of reform and reversal, where policies introduced under public pressure are later abandoned or modified due to unforeseen challenges.

Ultimately, the neglect of prudence in Nigerian governance risks entrenching instability rather than resolving it. A Burkean approach, grounded in gradualism, institutional respect, and contextual sensitivity, offers a framework for mitigating these risks while pursuing meaningful and sustainable reform.

### **Recommendations: Gradual Reform and Political Stability**

#### **Encouraging Participatory Governance within Existing Institutions**

A central implication of Burkean prudence for contemporary Nigeria is the need to deepen participatory governance within existing institutional frameworks rather than circumventing them through extra-constitutional pressures. While protests and civic mobilization remain essential components of democratic expression, their effectiveness is enhanced when channeled into structured engagement with legislative, judicial, and administrative institutions. Participatory governance mechanisms—such as public consultations, stakeholder dialogues, and community-based policy forums—provide avenues for integrating citizen input into decision-making processes without destabilizing institutional order.

As Diamond (2008) argues, democratic consolidation depends not only on formal institutions but also on the extent to which citizens perceive those institutions as accessible and responsive. In this regard, strengthening participatory channels can bridge the gap between state and society, reducing the likelihood of disruptive protest cycles while fostering a culture of constructive engagement.

#### **Designing Reforms that Respect Tradition while Addressing Contemporary Grievances**

Burkean political philosophy emphasizes that meaningful reform must emerge from within the historical and institutional context of a society. In Nigeria, this requires designing policies that respect inherited political arrangements—such as federalism, constitutional governance, and established bureaucratic practices—while simultaneously addressing contemporary challenges such as corruption, inequality, and insecurity. Burke (1790/1987, p. 120) underscores this principle, noting:

A disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman. Everything else is vulgar in the conception, perilous in the execution.

This perspective highlights the importance of balancing continuity with change. Reforms that disregard institutional traditions risk provoking resistance and undermining legitimacy, whereas those that build incrementally upon existing frameworks are more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes. In the Nigerian context, this approach entails gradual constitutional reforms, phased economic policies, and context-sensitive governance strategies that reflect the country's complex socio-political realities (Suberu, 2010).

#### **Strengthening Public Trust in Democratic and Bureaucratic Processes**

A critical prerequisite for political stability in Nigeria is the restoration and consolidation of public trust in democratic and bureaucratic institutions. Persistent distrust—fueled by corruption, inefficiency, and perceived injustice—often drives citizens toward protest and populist alternatives. Addressing this challenge requires not only institutional reforms but also visible commitments to transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. As Enyiazu (2023, p. 25) observes:

The legitimacy of democratic governance in Nigeria is closely tied to the ability of institutions to respond effectively and fairly to citizen demands. Where such responsiveness is lacking, public trust erodes, and the propensity for civic unrest increases.

Strengthening trust therefore involves improving service delivery, ensuring equitable policy implementation, and reinforcing mechanisms of accountability such as anti-corruption agencies and judicial oversight. Over time, these measures can foster confidence in formal processes, reducing reliance on disruptive forms of political engagement. Ultimately, a Burkean approach to reform in Nigeria calls for a careful synthesis of participation, tradition, and institutional strengthening. By embedding change within established frameworks and prioritizing gradual, inclusive reforms, policymakers can address pressing societal demands while preserving the stability necessary for long-term democratic development.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explored the complex nexus between agitations, populism, and governance in contemporary Nigeria using Edmund Burke's doctrine of prudence and gradual reform as the theoretical framework. The study argued that while civic mobilization, demonstrated in movements such as the End SARS protest and the rise of populist political currents like the Obedient Movement, reflect legitimate demands for accountability, justice, and institutional responsiveness, their ability to bring about the anticipated change must be carefully moderated by the imperatives of political stability. The analysis underscores that unchecked reforms, especially the ones driven by populism and unmitigated desire for change, risk worsening social divisions, and generate instability.

Two key insights emerged from the study. Firstly, it demonstrates the continuing diagnostic relevance of Edmund Burke's political philosophy, which lies in its emphasis on prudence, respect for tradition, and gradual reform. Therefore, the study provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding not just Nigeria's contemporary challenges, but also those faced by any polity experiencing similar political pressure. Consequently, on the first count, Burke's insight that effective governance requires a balance between preservation and improvement remains particularly instructive for navigating the tensions between public demands and institutional capacity (Burke, 1790/1987). For scholars, this study underscores the importance of integrating classical political theory with contemporary empirical realities in analyzing global governance contexts.

Second, the study illustrates the potential of Burke's framework for informing policy designs that harmonize the tension between the demands for urgent change and the need for stability. For policymakers, it highlights the necessity of designing reforms that are both responsive and institutionally grounded, prioritizing gradual implementation, inclusivity, and long-term stability. For civic actors, particularly in Nigeria like the Obedient Movement, it suggests that while protest remains an important democratic tool, its effectiveness is enhanced when aligned with constitutional processes and sustained engagement with formal institutions. Overall, Burke's insight in the context of Nigeria, indicates that democratization does not require either wholesale rejection of change or uncritical acceptance of it. Rather, it lies in the careful harmonization of reform with stability ensuring that political transformation proceed in a prudent, sustainable, and socially cohesive manner.

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