



Evaluating Digital Economy Policies and Youth Empowerment Amid Democratic Backsliding in Nigeria

Evaluasi Kebijakan Ekonomi Digital dan Pemberdayaan Pemuda dalam Regresi Demokrasi di Nigeria

Sherif Abdul Raheem Ajiteru¹, M. Reza Saputra²

¹Department of Political Science & International Relations, Achievers University, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria

²Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jakarta, Indonesia

Article Info

Corresponding Author:

Sherif Abdul Raheem Ajiteru

✉ ajiterudr.sheriffdeen@gmail.com

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Abstract

Democratic backsliding and institutional exclusion within hybrid electoral regimes create a structural paradox when technocratic digital economy modernization operates alongside the systematic restriction of civil liberties. This study evaluated the dysfunction of youth empowerment policies in Nigeria and employed exploratory documentary policy analysis, historical institutionalism, and a comparative case study involving Kenya and Estonia. The analysis demonstrates that initiatives training three million technical talents and expanding telecommunications infrastructure fail to generate substantive economic empowerment due to structural conversion gaps, informal sector dominance, and persistent device affordability barriers. Policy effectiveness is further undermined by the transfer of citizen databases to foreign jurisdictions, the enactment of cybercrime legislation legalizing warrantless communication surveillance, and unilateral social media restrictions. Synthesizing the capability approach, political opportunity structure, and democratic backsliding confirms that cyber repression triggers digital opposition mobilization and skilled labor emigration, whereas democratic consolidation requires data localization, online deliberation decriminalization, and meritocratic public procurement.

Abstrak

Regresi demokrasi dan eksklusi kelembagaan pada rezim elektoral hibrida menciptakan paradoks struktural ketika agenda modernisasi ekonomi digital dijalankan bersamaan dengan penyempitan ruang kebebasan sipil. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengevaluasi disfungsi kebijakan pemberdayaan pemuda di Nigeria melalui analisis kebijakan dokumenter eksploratif, pendekatan kelembagaan historis, serta studi kasus komparatif terhadap Kenya dan Estonia. Hasil analisis membuktikan bahwa inisiatif pelatihan tiga juta talenta teknis dan perluasan jaringan telekomunikasi gagal menghasilkan pemberdayaan ekonomi substantif karena terhambat oleh kesenjangan konversi struktural, dominasi sektor informal, serta tingginya biaya perangkat komunikasi. Efektivitas kebijakan tersebut juga tereduksi oleh pengalihan basis data warga negara ke yurisdiksi asing, pemberlakuan regulasi kejahatan siber yang melegitimasi pengawasan komunikasi tanpa otorisasi pengadilan, serta pembatasan akses media sosial. Integrasi pendekatan kapabilitas, struktur peluang politik, dan regresi demokrasi menegaskan bahwa represi siber memicu mobilisasi oposisi digital serta emigrasi talenta terampil, sehingga konsolidasi tata kelola digital internasional mensyaratkan lokalisasi data, dekriminalisasi ruang daring, dan pengadaan publik meritokratis.



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A. INTRODUCTION

1. Background

The tension between formal constitutional architecture and the actual exercise of executive power stands as a central structural problem in contemporary discourses on democratic backsliding. Rather than succumbing to coercive military coups, modern democracies increasingly erode incrementally through formal legal instruments wielded by democratically elected incumbents.¹

These mechanisms of institutional subversion operate through expanded executive discretion, judicial co-optation, regulatory shifts that constrain political opposition, and the systematic contraction of civil liberties.² Across jurisdictions experiencing democratic erosion, incumbents routinely deploy legal restructuring to hollow out horizontal accountability while maintaining electoral procedures strictly on a nominal level.³

Across developing nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, such electoral authoritarianism frequently unfolds alongside agendas of administrative modernization and macroeconomic development.⁴ As Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, Nigeria offers a critical locus of study for examining this governance anomaly. Although the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria formally establishes a multiparty democracy anchored in the separation of powers, actual state practice reveals acute institutional fragility. This vulnerability manifests in executive centralization, weak party institutionalization, and persistent restrictions on freedom of expression.⁵

Such institutional dysfunction bears directly upon Nigeria's heavily youth-dominated demographic structure. Because the informal sector still accounts for 93.0%

¹ Larry Diamond, "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes," *Democratization* 28, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 22–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1807517>.

² Marianne Kneuer, "Democratic Erosion and Its International Implications: How Governments in Eroding Democracies Shift Their Foreign Policy Behaviour," *Democratization*, August 5, 2026, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2026.2701455>.

³ Tomáš Krim, "Democratic Erosion in Central Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Autocratic Mechanisms in the Visegrád Group Countries," *Politics in Central Europe* 22, no. 2 (July 27, 2026): 177, <https://doi.org/10.51870/pce-2026-0008>.

⁴ Onyedikachi Madueke, "Federated Autocracy and the Illusion of Multiparty Democracy in Nigeria: Electoral Authoritarianism in Perspective," *Regional & Federal Studies*, November 10, 2025, 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2025.2582746>.

⁵ Onyedikachi Madueke, "Weak Parties, Strong Elites: Political Institutionalisation and Democratic Fragility in Nigeria," *African Identities*, April 7, 2026, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2026.2657558>.

of national labor absorption, the state's limited capacity to generate formal employment has entrenched persistent socioeconomic vulnerability among its youth cohort.⁶

To counter these demographic pressures and structural unemployment, the Federal Government of Nigeria enacted a suite of digital economy policies and regulatory instruments. These include the *National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy 2020–2030*, the *Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020–2025*, the *Nigeria Startup Act 2022*, and the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* program under the Ministry of Communications, Innovation, and Digital Economy—an initiative targeting the training of three million technical talents to generate two million digital jobs by the 2026 digital economy policy review.^{7,8,9,10} This regulatory framework rests on a technocratic assumption: that expanding telecommunications infrastructure, advancing artificial intelligence governance, and scaling technical skills training will linearly resolve the youth employment deficit while accelerating national economic growth.

Yet a review of primary journal literature over the past five years reveals significant scholarly debate regarding the efficacy of digital policy instruments deployed within hybrid regimes. A first strand of scholarship, focusing on digital capacity and political economy, highlights the emancipatory potential of information technology penetration. While studies by Diamond, Kneuer, and Krim emphasize that long-term developmental stability ultimately requires accountable democratic institutions,^{11,12,13} Virk et al. underscore that youth employment interventions in Nigeria are routinely stymied by a structural mismatch between state programs and the absorptive capacity of the formal labor market.¹⁴ In the realm of public participation, Apata demonstrates that rising digital

⁶ Amrit Virk, Edimo-Ubong Nelson, and Ini Dele-Adedeji, "The Challenge of Youth Unemployment in Nigeria," *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy* 39, no. 3 (November 22, 2023): 319–29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ics.2024.4>.

⁷ Nigeria, "National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy 2020–2030," *Digital Watch*, 2019, <https://dig.watch/resource/nigerias-national-digital-economy-policy-and-strategy-2020-2030>.

⁸ Nigeria, "New Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020 - 2025," *Nigerian Communications Commission*, 2019, <https://ncc.gov.ng/media-center/public-notice/new-nigerian-national-broadband-plan-2020-2025>.

⁹ Nigeria, "Nigeria Startup Act, 2022," 2022, <https://placng.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/NIGERIA-STARTUP-ACT-2022.pdf>.

¹⁰ Nigeria, "3MTT Partners Hello.Cv to Place Nigerian Tech Talent on the Global Map," 2026, <https://fmcide.gov.ng/3mtt-partners-hello-cv-to-place-nigerian-tech-talent-on-the-global-map/>.

¹¹ Diamond, "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes."

¹² Kneuer, "Democratic Erosion and Its International Implications: How Governments in Eroding Democracies Shift Their Foreign Policy Behaviour."

¹³ Krim, "Democratic Erosion in Central Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Autocratic Mechanisms in the Visegrád Group Countries."

¹⁴ Virk, Nelson, and Dele-Adedeji, "The Challenge of Youth Unemployment in Nigeria."

literacy among Nigerian youth correlates positively with the formation of civic agency, particularly when formal channels of political representation are obstructed.¹⁵

Conversely, a second body of literature grounded in political sociology and institutionalism critiques this technological determinism. Research by Madueke, as well as Mohammed and Yahuza, demonstrates that youth political participation and economic mobility in Nigeria remain tightly constrained by elite patronage networks, party cartelization, and institutional exclusion across both local and federal levels.^{16,17,18} Extending this critique, Elegba et al. observe that the expansion of Nigeria's cyberspace has been accompanied by intensified information control and state mass surveillance, exemplified by the 222-day suspension of Twitter (X) in 2021 and the enactment of the *Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Amendment Act 2024*.¹⁹ This updated cybersecurity legislation not only mandates the reporting of cyber incidents to the National Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) within 72 hours and imposes a cybersecurity levy, but also preserves the normative ambiguity of Section 24—a provision frequently leveraged by law enforcement to silence journalists and government critics.

A third scholarly camp examines youth sociopolitical responses to this institutional impasse and economic strain along two primary trajectories: digital protest mobilization and skilled labor migration. Omilusi notes that the closure of formal deliberative channels has compelled young Nigerians to convert social media networks into instruments of decentralized mobilization. This dynamic spans from the 2020 #EndSARS movement to the August 2024–2025 #EndBadGovernance demonstrations—protests triggered by the removal of fuel subsidies, the devaluation of the Naira, and acute food inflation, which ultimately resulted in the detention of over a thousand protesters.²⁰ Concurrently, studies

¹⁵ Stella Bolanle Apata, "Digital Literacy and Civic Agency: Youth-Led Hashtag Movements in Nigeria's #EndSARS Protest," *De-Centre: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 1 (September 2, 2025): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.36615/37t4gr11>.

¹⁶ Madueke, "Federated Autocracy and the Illusion of Multiparty Democracy in Nigeria: Electoral Authoritarianism in Perspective."

¹⁷ Madueke, "Weak Parties, Strong Elites: Political Institutionalisation and Democratic Fragility in Nigeria."

¹⁸ Abdullahi Jimoh Mohammed and Danjuma Izom Yahuza, "Assessment of Barriers to Youth Participation in Politics and Its Implications for Democratic Governance in Niger State, Nigeria," *Federal University Gusau Faculty of Education Journal* 6, no. 2 (March 4, 2026): 19–25, <https://doi.org/10.64348/zije.2026292>.

¹⁹ Adeola Abdulateef Elegba, Abdulateef Mohammed, and Felix Oloyede, "The Fall of a Dry Leaf Is a Warning to the Green Ones': Exploring the Twitter Ban and the Impending Dangers of Data Politics, Algorithmic Governance, and Mass Surveillance in Nigeria," *First Monday* 28, no. 4 (April 7, 2023): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i4.12692>.

²⁰ Mike Omilusi, "Participatory Governance and Youth Protests in the Digital Age: Interrogating the #EndSARS Movement," *African Security* 18, no. 2 (April 3, 2025): 122–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2025.2474276>.

by Thomas et al. and Adedokun et al. demonstrate that the convergence of deteriorating domestic institutional quality, legal uncertainty, and macroeconomic instability has fueled a wave of professional and tech-talent emigration (brain drain), sociologically conceptualized as the "Japa" phenomenon.^{21,22}

Synthesizing this extant literature exposes a critical analytical blind spot in the study of Nigerian democracy and public policy. Existing scholarship tends to examine the macroeconomic outcomes of digital infrastructure, the normative dimensions of cybersecurity legislation, the dynamics of online protest mobilization, and the phenomenon of talent migration in isolation, confining each to its respective disciplinary silo.

Departing from prior studies that predominantly offer compartmentalized sectoral evaluations of digital economy infrastructure, normative analyses of cybersecurity laws, or standalone sociological accounts of protest and migration, this study advances a novel, integrative approach. Specifically, it places the legal architecture of digital empowerment policies into direct theoretical dialogue with the capability approach, political opportunity structure theory, and the literature on democratic backsliding.

Through this integrative lens, the study demonstrates that the inefficacy of youth empowerment policies in Nigeria stems from a structural conversion gap. Specifically, a profound disconnect persists between policy inputs—measured by technical training quotas—and substantive outputs, namely formal labor market absorption, the protection of data sovereignty under the oversight of the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC), and the safeguarding of civil rights within the digital sphere.

Grounded in this analytical mapping, the central thesis of this article is that digital innovation policy instruments cannot autonomously generate youth economic empowerment or consolidate national development when implemented within a political regime undergoing democratic backsliding and civic space restrictions.

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance for scholars of political science and constitutional law. It demonstrates that technocratic development pursued

²¹ Dara Thomas et al., "The 'Japa-Japada' Construct: A Theoretical Framework for Exploring the Recent Medical Brain Drain Scourge in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Potential Medical Reverse Brain Drain," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 107 (July 2025): 102201, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2025.102201>.

²² Ojo J. Adedokun et al., "Economic and Geopolitical Push Factors, and Migration Tendencies in Nigeria: The Intervening Role of Institutional Quality," *Scientific African* 30 (December 2025): e02955, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sciaf.2025.e02955>.

alongside the erosion of civil liberties—a dynamic known as stealth authoritarianism—ultimately deepens citizen political alienation, triggers confrontation in cyberspace, and accelerates the loss of state-funded human capital (brain drain).

By way of theoretical implication and policy prescription, achieving an inclusive digital economic transformation requires four interlocking reforms: synchronizing technical talent training with formal job creation; enforcing data localization clauses to secure national data sovereignty under the framework of the *Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023*; revising provisions that permit surveillance without judicial authorization in the *Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Amendment Act 2024* to decriminalize online deliberative spaces; and establishing merit-based public procurement schemes capable of converting talent emigration into domestic technological capacity circulation.

2. Research Questions

Building upon the problem formulation and analytical blind spots identified in the preceding background section, the following research questions are structured to guide the analytical trajectory of this study:

- a. How can the theoretical frameworks of the capability approach, political opportunity structure, and democratic backsliding be operationalized to analyze the structural constraints of youth empowerment policies within Nigeria's digital economy?
- b. How does the implementation of the Federal Government of Nigeria's digital economy policy instruments—specifically the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* program and the expansion of broadband infrastructure—generate a conversion gap between technological access indicators and youth labor absorption in the formal sector?
- c. How do the governance of cross-border data flows, the enactment of the *Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Amendment Act 2024*, and state restrictions on social media platforms affect national data sovereignty and the safeguarding of civil liberties in Nigeria?
- d. How do constricted channels of formal institutional representation and acute macroeconomic pressures shape digital civic mobilization (notably the #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance movements) and drive the emigration of skilled labor—commonly conceptualized as brain drain or the *Japa* phenomenon—in Nigeria?

- e. How can a comparative analysis of digital governance dynamics in Nigeria, youth political mobilization in Kenya, and the institutionalization of e-governance in Estonia inform public policy prescriptions that foster both democratic consolidation and inclusive economic development?

3. Research Method

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research design grounded in documentary policy analysis, informed by critical constructivism and historical institutionalism.²³ This methodological choice reflects the need to move beyond surface-level descriptions of formal regulatory norms and macroeconomic indicators. Instead, the design interrogates the underlying institutional mechanisms, power configurations, and structural contradictions between technocratic development agendas and the constriction of democratic space in Nigeria. To contextualize these domestic dynamics, the analysis incorporates a comparative case study framework, juxtaposing Nigeria's digital governance trajectory against youth political mobilization in Kenya and the institutionalization of e-governance in Estonia.

Data sources and units of analysis are structured across three distinct tiers: primary legal and policy instruments, institutional actors, and secondary empirical data. Primary sources comprise statutory frameworks and official policy documents issued by the Federal Government of Nigeria. These include the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the *National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy 2020–2030*, the *Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020–2025*, and the *Nigeria Startup Act 2022*. The analysis also examines the *Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023*—alongside its *General Application and Implementation Directive (GAID)* and Compliance Audit Returns regime overseen by the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC)—as well as the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* framework and the 2026 digital economy policy review conducted by the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA). Rounding out the primary legal corpus is the *Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Amendment Act 2024*, which mandates 72-hour cyber incident reporting to the National Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), enforces National Identification Number (NIN) integration, and establishes a cybersecurity levy coordinated by the Office of the

²³ Nicole Mockler and Meghan Stacey, "Document and Text Analysis in Critical Education Policy Studies," in *Analysing Education Policy* (London: Routledge, 2024), 21–27, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003353379-4>.

National Security Adviser (ONSA). At the actor level, the institutional units of analysis encompass state executives and relevant ministries, telecommunications and cybersecurity regulators, multinational technology corporations, youth cohorts, and civil society organizations. Secondary data are drawn from official statistical reports by Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), industry assessments by GSMA Intelligence, global democracy indices, and primary peer-reviewed scholarship.

Data collection relies on systematic desk research, tracing regulatory statutes, policy briefs, and scholarly publications. This documentary excavation is paired with the extraction of secondary quantitative data tracking formal and informal labor force participation, broadband penetration rates, device affordability ratios, and skilled labor migration flows. To secure internal validity and data reliability, the study employs source triangulation, cross-examining official state claims against independent industry audits and empirical academic findings.

Data analysis is operationalized through three analytical instruments designed to place empirical findings into dialogue with the capability approach, political opportunity structure theory, and the democratic backsliding literature. First, thematic analysis is deployed to classify patterns within the conversion gap linking technical training inputs, structural labor market barriers, and skilled talent emigration (brain drain). Second, stakeholder analysis maps the power constellations and asymmetries of interest among state authorities, foreign platform providers, and citizens in the governance of cross-border data flows and national data localization. Third, critical discourse analysis deconstructs the legal rationalities and national security narratives invoked to justify social media restrictions and the expansion of state powers to intercept and retain communication traffic data.²⁴ Together, these three analytical lenses provide an integrated foundation for formulating conclusions and policy prescriptions aimed at strengthening democratic quality and fostering inclusive digital governance.

²⁴ Lisa Garbe and Seraphine F. Maerz, "The Rise of Authoritarian Informationalism: Escalating Surveillance, Manipulation, and Control," *Democratization* 33, no. 1 (January 2, 2026): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2025.2579105>.

B. DISCUSSION

1. Operationalizing the Capability Approach, Political Opportunity Structure, and Democratic Backsliding in Nigerian Digital Policy

Analyzing youth empowerment policies within the digital economy of a hybrid regime requires an exploratory documentary policy analysis framework informed by critical constructivism and historical institutionalism.²⁵ Rather than treating statutory enactments and digital economy blueprints as neutral administrative instruments, this approach conceptualizes them as political artifacts that reflect underlying power configurations and ruling elite interests. To interrogate the disjuncture between the formal norms of technocratic development policy and the reality of shrinking democratic space in Nigeria, this study synthesizes three primary theoretical frameworks: the capability approach, political opportunity structure theory, and democratic backsliding.

The first theoretical pillar adapts Amartya Sen's capability approach, as formulated in *Development as Freedom*, as an evaluative instrument for public policy.²⁶ Within Sen's framework, development cannot be reduced to aggregate national income growth or the mere provision of technological commodities; rather, it must be measured by the expansion of citizens' substantive freedoms to achieve valued functionings. Socioeconomic underdevelopment persists when citizens experience capability deprivation—or structural unfreedom—stemming from the denial of political rights, inadequate social safety nets, and labor market exclusion.

Building on this thesis, empirical research by Bahr et al. demonstrates that within the information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) ecosystem, digital resources translate into human development only when simultaneously supported by two dimensions of freedom: opportunity freedom and process freedom, the latter encompassing guaranteed freedom of expression in cyberspace.²⁷ Absent adequate institutional conversion factors and protections for free expression, the acquisition of technical skills reduces citizens to passive beneficiaries who lack the agency required to transform their socioeconomic conditions.

²⁵ Mockler and Stacey, "Document and Text Analysis in Critical Education Policy Studies."

²⁶ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Page, 13-34.

²⁷ Gabriel Bahr, Bryan Hammer, and Andy Luse, "ICT4D and the Capability Approach: Understanding How Freedom of Expression on ICTs Affect Human Development at the Country-Level," *Information Technology for Development* 31, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 33–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02681102.2024.2337048>.

Operationalizing Sen's capability framework alongside the findings of Bahr et al. to evaluate Nigeria's digital economy regulatory portfolio—spanning the *National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy 2020–2030*, the *Nigeria Startup Act 2022*, the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* initiative, the *National Digital Economy and E-Governance Bill 2026*, and the *NITDA Digital Economy Policy Review 2026*—exposes a structural deficit in institutional conversion factors.

The Federal Government of Nigeria designed its policy architecture around a linear assumption: that supplying policy inputs—specifically technical training quotas for three million youths in software engineering, data science, and artificial intelligence—will automatically yield economic empowerment. Empirically, Nigerian youths who complete such training confront entrenched structural barriers, notably the formal labor market's inability to absorb new graduates and prohibitive costs for telecommunications hardware and internet data (the affordability barrier).

Viewed through the capability approach, mastering digital competencies within an economy dominated by the informal sector and starved of venture capital access does not automatically generate substantive capabilities. This disconnect persists because the state fails to establish viable conversion channels capable of translating technical proficiency into decent employment.

The second theoretical pillar operationalizes Sidney Tarrow's concept of political opportunity structure (POS) to analyze how Nigerian youth have shifted their civic participation from formal institutional arenas into the digital sphere.²⁸ Tarrow posits that the emergence of contentious politics and collective mobilization is not dictated solely by the depth of economic deprivation. Instead, mobilization is conditioned by the degree of openness or closure within formal political institutions, the stability of elite alignments, the availability of connective structures, and the capacity for coalition-building across social groups.

Within contemporary governance contexts, Sorce and Dumitrica demonstrate that digital mediation has transformed conventional political opportunity structures by providing transnational communication infrastructures that enable decentralized, leaderless social movement coordination (leaderless connectivity).²⁹ Studies in Nigeria by

²⁸ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 4th ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), Page, 16–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009219839>.

²⁹ Giuliana Sorce and Delia Dumitrica, "Transnational Dimensions in Digital Activism and Protest," *Review of Communication* 22, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 157–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2022.2107877>.

Mohammed and Yahuza, alongside Uwalaka and Nwala, reinforce this insight. Their findings confirm that the obstruction of youth political participation at both local and federal levels—driven by elite patronage, prohibitive electoral campaign costs, and party co-optation—has compelled public participation to migrate onto mobile social media networks.^{30,31}

Operationalizing political opportunity structure theory reveals that cyberspace in Nigeria functions as a mechanism of institutional substitution triggered by the closure of formal representative channels. When legislatures, political parties, and executive bureaucracies remain unresponsive to demands for job creation and governance accountability, young citizens leverage the digital affordances of social media platforms as alternative deliberative spaces to articulate public grievances. Yet the openness of this online opportunity structure does not correspond to a commensurate opening in the institutional opportunity structure at the state level. This structural asymmetry—pitting high youth digital mobilization capacity against rigid institutional unresponsiveness—serves as the primary determinant of recurring confrontations between civil society movements and state security apparatuses in Nigeria.

The third theoretical pillar integrates the concepts of democratic backsliding and digital authoritarianism to deconstruct the state's regulatory response to rising youth cyber-agency. Comparative scholarship by Diamond, Kneuer, and Krim underscores that the quality and accountability of democratic institutions are fundamental prerequisites for both domestic governance stability and international policy credibility; when oversight institutions erode, legal instruments are routinely manipulated to entrench executive power.^{32,33,34}

Nancy Bermeo conceptualizes this phenomenon as state-led democratic backsliding—the calculated weakening of executive checks and balances by

³⁰ Mohammed and Yahuza, "Assessment of Barriers to Youth Participation in Politics and Its Implications for Democratic Governance in Niger State, Nigeria."

³¹ Temple Uwalaka and Bigman Nwala, "Examining the Role of Social Media and Mobile Social Networking Applications in Socio-Political Contestations in Nigeria," *Communication and the Public* 8, no. 3 (September 24, 2023): 175–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20570473231168474>.

³² Diamond, "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes."

³³ Kneuer, "Democratic Erosion and Its International Implications: How Governments in Eroding Democracies Shift Their Foreign Policy Behaviour."

³⁴ Krim, "Democratic Erosion in Central Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Autocratic Mechanisms in the Visegrád Group Countries."

democratically elected incumbents.³⁵ Complementing Bermeo's thesis, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that contemporary democratic erosion operates through formal legal mechanisms (autocratic legalism), whereby incumbents gradually dismantle norms of mutual toleration toward political opposition and abandon institutional forbearance in the exercise of legal authority.³⁶

In the domain of information technology governance, Roberts and Oosterom, as well as Achinivu, demonstrate that African hybrid regimes—and Nigeria in particular—deploy instruments of digital authoritarianism, including cybersecurity statutes, communications surveillance, and platform restrictions, to curtail opposition mobilization under the guise of national sovereignty and public order.^{37,38}

Synthesizing these three theoretical frameworks reveals a fundamental structural contradiction within Nigeria's digital policy architecture. On one hand, the executive branch actively modernizes commercial regulations—enacting the *Nigeria Startup Act 2022*, establishing the Compliance Audit Returns (CARs) regime under the *Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023* and its *General Application and Implementation Directive (GAID)*, and advancing the *NITDA Digital Economy Policy Review 2026*—to attract global venture capital and boost the technology sector's contribution to gross domestic product (GDP). On the other hand, the state retains and expands legal instruments that constrict civil liberties in the digital sphere (stealth authoritarianism), exemplified by the enactment of the *Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Amendment Act 2024* and the precedent of social media platform suspensions. Figure 1 conceptually maps this causal nexus linking technological policy inputs, structural conversion barriers, and the dualism of youth responses within Nigeria's landscape of democratic backsliding.

³⁵ Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>.

³⁶ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2018). Page, 3-5, 102.

³⁷ Tony Roberts and Marjoke Oosterom, "Digital Authoritarianism: A Systematic Literature Review," *Information Technology for Development* 31, no. 4 (October 2, 2025): 860–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02681102.2024.2425352>.

³⁸ Chibuzo Achinivu, "Understanding Digital Authoritarianism in Africa: The Case of Nigeria," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 43, no. 3 (July 3, 2025): 390–405, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2025.2548785>.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Intersection of Digital Economy Capabilities, Cyber Political Opportunity Structure, and Democratic Backsliding in Nigeria



Source: Author's elaboration, 2026.

As illustrated in Figure 1, digital economy policy interventions in Nigeria do not operate in a political vacuum; rather, they are filtered through three mutually reinforcing layers of institutional distortion. First, the absence of macroeconomic conversion factors impedes the transformation of technical training inputs into productive employment functionings, perpetuating structural unfreedom among the youth labor force.

Second, the closure of political opportunity structures within formal representative institutions compels young citizens to convert their digital literacy into instruments of extra-parliamentary mobilization in cyberspace. Third, the state apparatus's reliance on civic space restrictions—manifesting as democratic backsliding and digital authoritarianism—further widens this conversion gap.

Consequently, rather than fostering inclusive national development, this governance asymmetry—pairing the promotion of digital capitalism with the curtailment of civil liberties—bifurcates the sociopolitical responses of Nigerian youth into two adaptive trajectories: open confrontation through digital protest movements (#EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance) or civic disengagement via skilled talent emigration abroad (brain drain, or the *Japa* phenomenon).

2. Evaluating Digital Economy Policy and the Youth Employment Conversion Gap

To assess the efficacy of digital economy policy instruments in generating youth employment in Nigeria, this section pairs thematic analysis with data source triangulation. Normative state documents—comprising the *National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (NDEPS) 2020–2030*, the *New Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020–2025*, the *Nigeria Startup Act 2022*, and the implementation framework of the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* program coordinated by the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) through 2026—are cross-examined against secondary statistical reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), and GSMA Intelligence covering the 2024–2026 period.^{39,40,41} This analytical approach measures the extent to which official claims of macroeconomic growth in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector correspond to actual formal employment expansion for young Nigerians.

Scholarship over the past five years reveals a sharp divergence between technocratic-macroeconomic and structural-labor perspectives regarding the impact of digital interventions in Nigeria. Proponents of the technocratic view, notably articulated by Bosun Tijani, contend that building a technical talent backbone through the 3MTT program alongside broadband expansion serves as the primary lever to position Nigeria as a net talent exporter and generate two million digital jobs.⁴²

This optimistic projection routinely draws upon macroeconomic assessments by the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA), which report that the mobile technology ecosystem contributed approximately 7.8%—equivalent to USD 240 billion—to Africa’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2025 while supporting roughly 13 million direct and indirect jobs.⁴³ Yet this underlying technological determinism faces fundamental critique from Virk et al., who demonstrate that youth employment interventions in Nigeria consistently suffer from systemic failure due to a structural

³⁹ Nigeria, “National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy 2020–2030.”

⁴⁰ Nigeria, “New Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020 - 2025.”

⁴¹ Nigeria, “Nigeria Startup Act, 2022.”

⁴² Bosun Tijani, “How Nigeria Is Leading on Digital Transformation for a Stronger Economy,” World Economic Forum, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/emerging-technologies/nigeria-digital-transformation-3mtt-technical-talent/>.

⁴³ Global System for Mobile Communications Association, “Mobile Technologies Contributed \$240 Billion to Africa’s Economy in 2025 as the Continent Enters a New Phase of Digital Transformation,” GSMA, 2026, <https://www.gsma.com/newsroom/press-release/mobile-technologies-contributed-240-billion-to-africas-economy-in-2025-as-the-continent-enters-a-new-phase-of-digital-transformation/>.

disconnect between vocational training programs and the absorptive capacity of the formal labor market.⁴⁴ Reinforcing this structural critique, Awowede highlights device affordability barriers among low-income populations, while Okamgba documents persistent technical and administrative bottlenecks plaguing the 3MTT registration database itself.^{45,46}

Triangulating empirical data against this scholarly debate exposes a stark conversion gap between macro-level sectoral growth indicators and grassroots technological accessibility. At the macroeconomic level, NCC and NBS data confirm that the information and communications sector contributed 19.78% to Nigeria's real GDP in the second quarter of 2024, accompanied by a 34.26% year-on-year surge in data consumption and active internet subscriptions surpassing 164 million connections.⁴⁷

Evaluated through the capability approach, these aggregate metrics obscure a profound affordability barrier and a persistent usage gap. GSMA data confirm that although mobile broadband networks now cover the majority of Nigeria's geographic territory, more than 130 million Nigerians—roughly 63% of the population residing within signal coverage areas—remain offline.⁴⁸

The primary obstacle is no longer a deficit of transmission infrastructure, but rather the financial inability of citizens to purchase entry-level internet-enabled handsets, which absorb nearly 50% of the average monthly income among the poorest quintile of the population. This exclusion has been compounded by a 50% telecommunications data tariff hike in 2025–2026 (rising from ₦287.50 to ₦431.25 per gigabyte), breaching the ₦360 per gigabyte affordability ceiling established in the *National Broadband Plan 2020–2025*.^{49,50} Concurrently, national broadband penetration stood at 44.43% at the close of 2024 and reached only 50% to 56.11% by mid-2026—a substantial deviation from the

⁴⁴ Virk, Nelson, and Dele-Adedeji, "The Challenge of Youth Unemployment in Nigeria."

⁴⁵ Fejro Awowede, "Nigeria's 130 Million Offline Citizens: Why ₦45 Phones Could Transform the Nation's Digital Economy," *Technology Times*, 2025, <https://technologytimes.ng/₦45-phones-transforms-nigeria-digital-economy/>.

⁴⁶ Justice Okamgba, "3MTT: Applicants Face Registration Hurdles over Technical Glitches," *Punch Nigeria Limited*, 2024, <https://punchng.com/3mtt-applicants-face-registration-hurdles-over-technical-glitches/>.

⁴⁷ Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), "Industry Statistics: Subscriber and Data Consumption Report 2024," NCC Nigeria, 2024, <https://old.ncc.gov.ng/statistics-reports/subscriber-data#monthly-subscriber-technology-data>.

⁴⁸ Global System for Mobile Communications Association, "Mobile Technologies Contributed \$240 Billion to Africa's Economy in 2025 as the Continent Enters a New Phase of Digital Transformation."

⁴⁹ Nigeria, "New Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020 - 2025."

⁵⁰ Awowede, "Nigeria's 130 Million Offline Citizens: Why ₦45 Phones Could Transform the Nation's Digital Economy."

government's official target of 70% by late 2025, further exacerbated by over 19,000 fiber-optic cable cuts recorded throughout 2025.^{51,52}

At the level of human capital policy implementation, documentary evaluation of the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* program reveals a bureaucratic orientation heavily skewed toward input metrics (input-heavy) rather than outcome verification. Designed to train three million youths across twelve technical disciplines—including software development, data science, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence—the initiative recorded 1.7 million initial applicants competing for an intake quota of 30,000 participants in its first phase and 270,000 across three cohorts in its second phase.^{53,54}

Yet this surge in youth demand has collided with limited bureaucratic governance capacity, evidenced by recurring technical glitches on the registration portal, profile synchronization failures, and the absence of a transparent post-training tracking framework.⁵⁵ By mid-2026, job placement schemes operating through the 3MTT Talent Registry had secured only around 3,000 paid roles, with compensation capped at ₦150,000 per month—a figure vastly disproportionate to both the millions of applicants and the state’s official target of generating two million digital jobs.⁵⁶ Table 1 provides a comparative summary of these structural disparities between state macroeconomic claims and the reality of Nigeria's youth employment deficit.

Table 1. Disparities between Digital Policy Output Indicators and Structural Youth Employment Deficits in Nigeria (2024–2026)

Evaluation Sector / Dimension	Output Indicators & Macroeconomic Claims (Digital Sector Performance)	Structural Deficit Indicators & Conversion Gaps (Employment & Access Realities)
Macroeconomy & Labor Market Structure	19.78% contribution of the Information and Communications sector to national real GDP (Q2 2024); African mobile economy valuation reaching USD 240 billion (2025).	93.0% of the national labor force remains absorbed in the informal sector; minimal transmission channels linking ICT GDP growth to formal job creation.
Connectivity Infrastructure & Broadband Tariffs	+34.26% year-on-year domestic data consumption growth, supported by a base of >164 million active internet subscriptions across telecommunications networks.	Broadband penetration deficit of -25.57 percentage points in 2024 (44.43%) and -13.89 percentage points in May 2026 (56.11%) against the 70% national target (NBP 2020–2025); 50% data tariff hike to

⁵¹ Nigeria, “New Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020 - 2025.”
⁵² Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), “Industry Statistics: Subscriber and Data Consumption Report 2024.”
⁵³ Tijani, “How Nigeria Is Leading on Digital Transformation for a Stronger Economy.”
⁵⁴ Okamgba, “3MTT: Applicants Face Registration Hurdles over Technical Glitches.”
⁵⁵ Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), “Industry Statistics: Subscriber and Data Consumption Report 2024.”
⁵⁶ Tijani, “How Nigeria Is Leading on Digital Transformation for a Stronger Economy.”

		₦431.25/GB (exceeding the ₦360/GB target).
Human Capital Capacity & 3MTT Program Conversion	1.7 million initial applicants for the <i>Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)</i> training program, against an overarching training target of 3 million talents.	85.6% of workers engage in self-employment out of economic compulsion (necessity-driven entrepreneurship); the 2026 3MTT Talent Registry placement quota covers only 3,000 paid roles.
Digital Inclusion & Device Affordability	60%–70% national population digital literacy coverage target under the <i>National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (NDEPS) 2020–2030</i> framework.	>130 million Nigerians remain offline, driven by entry-level handset prices that absorb nearly 50% of the monthly income of the poorest 20% of the population.

Source: Synthesized by the author from documents of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), NDEPS 2020–2030, and GSMA Intelligence Reports (2024–2026).

The comparative evidence in Table 1 illustrates a severe bottleneck in the transmission channel linking digital economy policy interventions to labor formalization. Within a national economic structure where the informal sector accounts for 93.0% of employment and 85.6% of micro-enterprises operate out of economic compulsion rather than opportunity (necessity-driven entrepreneurship), expanding the supply of technical graduates without reforming the underlying labor market risks generating a wave of educated unemployment within the technology sector.

While the state enacted the *Nigeria Startup Act 2022* to offer startup labeling incentives and fiscal relief,⁵⁷ regulatory implementation remains undermined by the absence of affordable credit amid high benchmark interest rates, chronic power grid instability, and public procurement frameworks that fail to prioritize domestic technology providers. Absent policy integration that aligns 3MTT vocational training with hardware affordability subsidies and domestic formal labor demand, macroeconomic expansion in the telecommunications sector will fail to convert into substantive welfare gains or genuine economic empowerment for Nigerian youth.

3. Cross-Border Data Governance, Cyberspace Securitization, and the Constriction of Civil Liberties

To untangle the structural tension between digital economic promotion and the curtailment of civil liberties, this section operationalizes two analytical governance instruments. First, stakeholder analysis maps the asymmetric power relations pitting state authorities—represented by the Ministry of Communications, Innovation, and Digital Economy, the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC), and the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA)—against foreign corporate entities (such as the

⁵⁷ Nigeria, “Nigeria Startup Act, 2022.”

Hello.cv platform and Twitter/X) and citizens as data subjects. Second, critical discourse analysis deconstructs the normative rationalities embedded within key legal instruments, specifically the *Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Amendment Act 2024* and the *Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA) 2023* alongside its *General Application and Implementation Directive (GAID)*. These statutes are evaluated directly against the constitutional guarantees of free expression enshrined in Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Situating Nigeria's governance trajectory within contemporary scholarship on cyber surveillance, this analysis engages directly with theoretical debates on digital authoritarianism. Specifically, it places the concepts of *authoritarian informationalism* formulated by Garbe and Maerz,⁵⁸ and *stealth authoritarianism* developed by Levitsky and Ziblatt,⁵⁹ as well as Muhlberger into dialogue with the empirical findings of Elegba et al.^{60,61} Collectively, this body of scholarship demonstrates how hybrid regimes routinely exploit expanding telecommunications infrastructure to engineer mass surveillance architectures devoid of democratic accountability. Regarding cybercrime legislation, the analysis juxtaposes Nwafor's critique of the statutory ambiguity surrounding cyberstalking under Section 24 of the *Cybercrimes Amendment Act 2024*,⁶² research by Osimen et al. on the collision between national security securitization and citizen privacy rights,⁶³ and the study by Obiora et al. measuring autocratization through social media regulation under President Muhammadu Buhari.⁶⁴ The review further synthesizes

⁵⁸ Garbe and Maerz, "The Rise of Authoritarian Informationalism: Escalating Surveillance, Manipulation, and Control."

⁵⁹ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*. Page, 78-82.

⁶⁰ Peter Muhlberger, "Stealth Democracy: Authoritarianism and Democratic Deliberation," *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 14, no. 2 (December 14, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.309>.

⁶¹ Elegba, Mohammed, and Oloyede, "The Fall of a Dry Leaf Is a Warning to the Green Ones': Exploring the Twitter Ban and the Impending Dangers of Data Politics, Algorithmic Governance, and Mass Surveillance in Nigeria."

⁶² Ifeoma E. Nwafor, "Cyberstalking in Nigeria: An Exploratory Study of Section 24 of the Nigerian Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) (Amendment) Act, 2024," *International Cybersecurity Law Review* 5, no. 3 (September 1, 2024): 443–58, <https://doi.org/10.1365/s43439-024-00126-0>.

⁶³ Goddy Uwa Osimen, Mohadapwa Hunnongu Wonosikou, and Theresa Nfam Odeigah, "National Cybersecurity Policy and Citizens' Rights in Nigeria," *The International Journal of Human Rights*, January 23, 2026, 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2026.2619962>.

⁶⁴ Charles A. Obiora, Amobi P. Chiamogu, and Uchechukwu P. Chiamogu, "Social Media Regulation and Autocratisation in Nigeria under Buhari," *African Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 1 (October 3, 2025): 38–50, <https://doi.org/10.36615/szd2s675>.

critiques of national data sovereignty advanced by Onwuaso and Adepetun to evaluate the safeguarding of public information assets.^{65,66}

As a first empirical finding in the domain of data sovereignty, a critical assessment of the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* program exposes severe vulnerabilities in jurisdictional oversight. A USD 10 million strategic partnership between the Ministry of Communications, Innovation, and Digital Economy and the foreign platform Hello.cv transferred the management of biometric profiles, educational records, and professional portfolios of 20,000 participants onto servers operating under a foreign jurisdictional domain (.cv) rather than domestic domain infrastructure (.ng).⁶⁷ Outsourcing these data assets beyond national borders contradicts the state's declared *Nigeria First* principle and exposes the toothlessness of the NDPC's Compliance Audit Returns (CARs) regime, even though both the *Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023* and the *GAID* mandate stringent cross-border data protection mechanisms. The absence of enforceable data localization clauses creates acute vulnerabilities to data exfiltration, whereby the intellectual assets of Nigerian youth risk being appropriated to train global artificial intelligence algorithms without democratic consent or equitable domestic value distribution.

A second empirical finding concerns regulatory securitization through the enactment of the *Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Amendment Act 2024*, which functionally expands unilateral executive surveillance powers. Formally, the amendment modernizes Nigeria's cyber defense architecture by establishing sectoral Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERT), enforcing a 72-hour reporting mandate for cyber threats, integrating the National Identification Number (NIN) into electronic financial transactions, and imposing a cybersecurity levy administered by ONSA. Beneath these administrative reforms, however, the statute compels internet service providers to retain communication traffic data without requiring proportional judicial authorization. Moreover, the legislature retained the notoriously vague wording of Section 24 governing the transmission of electronic messages—a provision repeatedly weaponized by law enforcement to generate a chilling effect against investigative journalism, whistleblowers, and youth activist advocacy.

⁶⁵ Ugo Onwuaso, "FG Must Consider Data Security, Sovereignty in 3MTT Initiative – Stakeholders," *Nigeria Communications Week*, 2026, <https://nigeriacommunicationsweek.com.ng/2026/07/31/fg-must-consider-data-security-sovereignty-in-3mtt-initiative-stakeholders>.

⁶⁶ Adeyemi Adepetun, "FG Must Prioritise Data Security, Sovereignty in 3MTT Initiative," *The Guardian*, 2026, <https://guardian.ng/news/fg-must-prioritise-data-security-sovereignty-in-3mtt-initiative/>.

⁶⁷ Nigeria, "3MTT Partners Hello.Cv to Place Nigerian Tech Talent on the Global Map."

A third empirical finding deconstructs the political rationality and national security pretexts underlying state restrictions on social media platforms, focusing on the 222-day suspension of X (formerly Twitter) in 2021. Viewed through the lens of critical discourse analysis, this suspension constituted an act of executive retaliation in direct violation of the free expression protections guaranteed under Section 39 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The official narrative invoking "threats to Nigeria's corporate existence" functioned merely as a technical pretext to sever the connective structures of political opposition groups operating across an ecosystem of more than 40 million active users. Paradoxically, this constriction of civic space severely disrupted remote work operations and domestic startups, directly undermining the inclusive economic ecosystem the federal government sought to cultivate through the enactment of the *Nigeria Startup Act 2022* the following year.

To systematically capture these contradictions between economic development objectives and the curtailment of civil liberties, Table 2 codifies the matrix of cyber regulations, dominant actors, and resulting power asymmetries. This mapping provides a concrete visualization of how public policy governance has failed to balance state security imperatives against citizen privacy rights.

Table 2. Matrix of Actor Interest Constellations, Cyber Regulatory Instruments, and Their Implications for Data Sovereignty and Constitutional Rights in Nigeria

Policy & Regulatory Instrument	Formal State Objective / Dominant Actor Interest	Normative Compliance Asymmetry & Legal Violations	Systemic Impact on the Democratic & Digital Economy Ecosystem
3MTT - Hello.cv Partnership (2026)	Internationalization of Nigerian digital talent and global job placement for 20,000 top participants by the Ministry of Communications.	Fails to meet <i>NDPA 2023</i> audit standards and <i>GAID</i> directives; hosting data on a foreign domain (.cv) bypasses data localization clauses.	Risk of citizen biometric data exfiltration, depletion of national data sovereignty, and unchecked commercialization by foreign corporate platforms.
Cybercrimes Amendment Act 2024	Centralization of cybersecurity command via ONSA, CERT interconnection (72-hour window), collection of the cybersecurity levy, and NIN identity integration.	Legalizes traffic data retention without independent judicial authorization and preserves the ambiguous wording of Section 24 on cyberstalking.	Institutionalizes mass surveillance structures, constricts civic deliberative space, and induces a chilling effect on independent journalism.
Twitter / X Suspension (2021)	National security justification to curb the spread of information deemed threatening to	Direct violation of Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of	Forced severance of youth protest network infrastructure, massive financial losses across the

	federal government stability (executive retaliation).	Nigeria and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.	startup ecosystem, and direct contradiction of the <i>Nigeria Startup Act 2022</i> vision.
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As the matrix in Table 2 demonstrates, the governance of cross-border data flows and the enactment of cyber legislation in Nigeria function not to bolster public technological sovereignty, but rather as coercive instruments sustaining authoritarian informationalism. The NDPC's inability to compel state institutions to comply with citizen data privacy regulations, coupled with the centralization of warrantless communications interception under ONSA, produces a decidedly asymmetric law enforcement architecture. At a conceptual level, this governance anomaly validates the thesis of stealth authoritarianism: a dynamic wherein competitive electoral regimes appropriate cyberspace to optimize state surveillance and extract digital economy rents, all while dismantling citizen deliberative capacity behind a veneer of legal procedure.

4. Digital Civic Mobilization and Talent Emigration (*Japa*) as Structural Responses

This section evaluates the sociopolitical responses of Nigerian youth to digital economy governance dysfunction and institutional regression. Operationalizing thematic analysis alongside historical institutionalism, the evaluation unpacks the causal nexus linking obstructed channels of formal representation—across both political parties and parliament—deteriorating macroeconomic indicators, and the bifurcation of youth agency into two primary adaptive trajectories: cyber protest mobilization (*voice*) and cross-border labor migration (*exit*, or brain drain).

Existing scholarship reflects ongoing debate over how youth articulate political interests under hybrid electoral regimes. Madueke characterizes Nigeria's political architecture as a federated autocracy defined by party elitism and institutional fragility,⁶⁸ a configuration that systematically constricts the space for citizen political participation.⁶⁹ Mohammed and Yahuza corroborate this structural assessment, identifying entrenched barriers within regional institutional governance.⁷⁰ Confronted with these electoral constraints, studies by Apata and Omilusi demonstrate that young Nigerians have

⁶⁸ Madueke, "Federated Autocracy and the Illusion of Multiparty Democracy in Nigeria: Electoral Authoritarianism in Perspective."

⁶⁹ Madueke, "Weak Parties, Strong Elites: Political Institutionalisation and Democratic Fragility in Nigeria."

⁷⁰ Mohammed and Yahuza, "Assessment of Barriers to Youth Participation in Politics and Its Implications for Democratic Governance in Niger State, Nigeria."

effectively converted digital literacy into civic agency.^{71,72} Digital platforms thus facilitate political coordination outside conventional institutional channels, a dynamic evident from the 2020 #EndSARS hashtag movement through the decentralized #EndBadGovernance demonstrations spanning 2024–2025.

Along the second adaptive trajectory, contemporary migration sociology highlights the mass emigration of educated youth and technological talent from Nigeria. Grounded in Everett Lee's classic push-pull migration framework, this demographic exodus is driven by the interplay between domestic structural pressures and livability incentives in destination countries.⁷³ Thomas et al. conceptualize this dynamic through the "Japa-Japada" theoretical construct, mapping both medical and technological brain drain alongside the potential for human capital return across Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷⁴ Examining the underlying causal mechanisms, Adelakun et al. confirm that domestic institutional quality serves as a critical moderating variable that amplifies the impact of macroeconomic push factors on national migration propensities.⁷⁵ Assessing the systemic fallout of this dysfunction, Adaja et al. conclude that the steady depletion of skilled human capital—widely termed the *Japa* syndrome—gradually erodes state operational capacity and jeopardizes sustainable socioeconomic development targets.⁷⁶

Synthesizing these empirical findings and theoretical frameworks reveals that the co-optation of political parties and labor unions by elite patronage networks has compelled young Nigerians to repurpose digital affordances—specifically X, Instagram, and the encrypted messaging application WhatsApp—as vehicles for non-electoral opposition. The inability of state institutions to accommodate public grievances has catalyzed movement structures built on leaderless connectivity. Through this cyber infrastructure, opposition networks independently manage crowdfunding operations, document security forces' crowd-control tactics in real time, and articulate demands for

⁷¹ Apata, "Digital Literacy and Civic Agency: Youth-Led Hashtag Movements in Nigeria's #EndSARS Protest."

⁷² Omilusi, "Participatory Governance and Youth Protests in the Digital Age: Interrogating the #EndSARS Movement."

⁷³ Everett S. Lee, "A Theory of Migration," *Demography* 3, no. 1 (March 1, 1966): 47–57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2060063>.

⁷⁴ Thomas et al., "The 'Japa-Japada' Construct: A Theoretical Framework for Exploring the Recent Medical Brain Drain Scourge in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Potential Medical Reverse Brain Drain."

⁷⁵ Adelakun et al., "Economic and Geopolitical Push Factors, and Migration Tendencies in Nigeria: The Intervening Role of Institutional Quality."

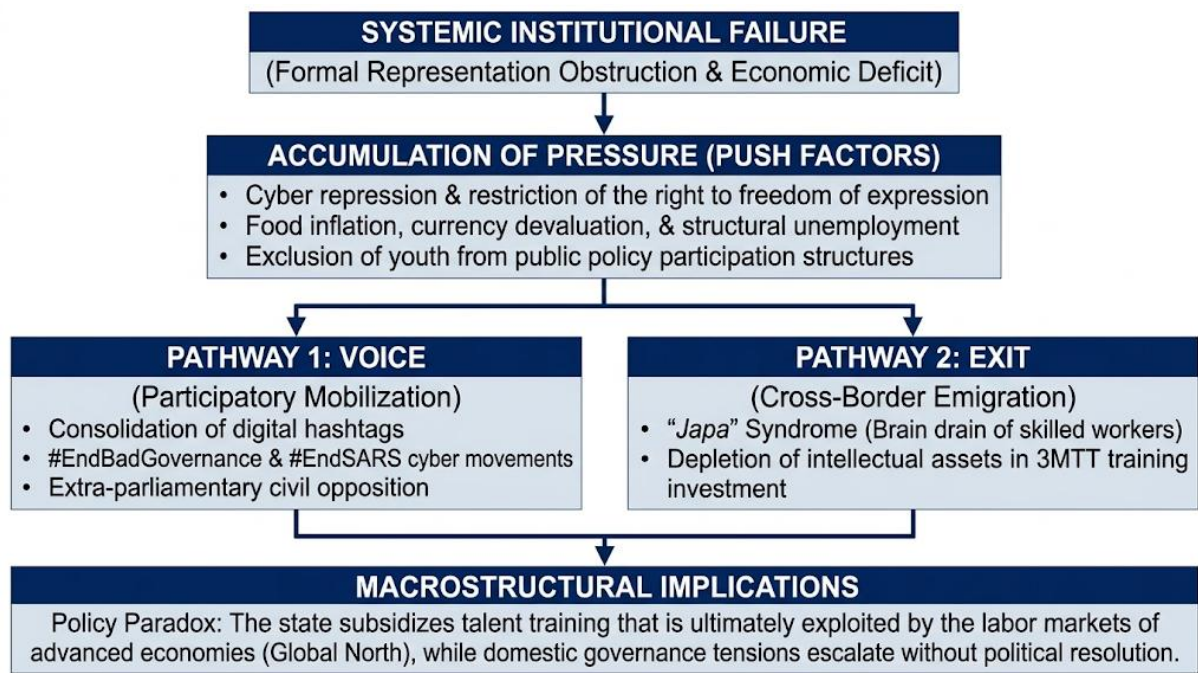
⁷⁶ Oluwaseyi Victor Adaja, Oyewole Femi Ebenezer, and Oluwasegun Francis Adaja, "Japa Syndrome Among Skilled Young Adults in Nigeria: Implications for Brain Drain and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development," *Mau International Journal of Educational Foundations* 2, no. 3 (July 1, 2026): 155–68, <https://doi.org/10.64290/mauijef.v2i3.96>.

distributive justice. This mobilization pattern materialized starkly during the August 2024–2025 #EndBadGovernance protests, which correlated directly with acute economic pressures stemming from the depreciation of the Naira, surging food inflation, and the unilateral removal of fuel subsidies.

Beyond participatory confrontation, economic regression and the securitization of cyberspace have triggered a structural counter-response in the form of cross-border emigration, locally conceptualized as the *Japa* syndrome. Political economy analysis indicates that the exodus of skilled professionals—including software engineers, cybersecurity specialists, and artificial intelligence technocrats—reflects more than eroding individual purchasing power. Rather, it operates as a mass tacit referendum against legal uncertainty, acute deficits in basic infrastructure, and prescriptive restrictions on free expression. This dynamic generates a stark public policy paradox: absent merit-based institutional reform, state fiscal commitments to mass technological training programs such as the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* initiative suffer severe functional distortion. In effect, the Nigerian state subsidizes the production of high-skilled human capital that is ultimately absorbed by corporations in the Global North, cumulatively deepening the domestic deficit in technocratic capacity.

To map the asymmetric interplay among political-economic determinants, state policy responses, and polarized youth adaptation, Figure 2 models this causal mechanism as a structural flowchart, illustrating the feedback loop between public policy and civic agency.

Figure 2. Causal Dynamics of Nigerian Youth Sociopolitical Responses to Digital Policy Dysfunction and Democratic Backsliding



Source: Author's elaboration, 2026.

Figure 2 illustrates the chain reaction set in motion by state institutional dysfunction. Political exclusion, compounded by macroeconomic instability and coercive cybersecurity regulations, generates systemic push factors across the working-age population. The accumulation of these pressures channels youth agency into two distinct trajectories: governance confrontation (*voice*) via digital opposition mobilization, and civic withdrawal (*exit*) through skilled labor emigration (*Japa*). Analytically, this causal pathway demonstrates that the state's failure to secure the rule of law and expand formal labor market absorption transforms digital modernization initiatives like the 3MTT program into capacity-draining conduits. Rather than accelerating Nigeria's transition toward an autonomous digital economy, these programs inadvertently subsidize external economies with state-trained talent.

5. International Comparative Analysis (Nigeria, Kenya, and Estonia) and Policy Implications for Democratic Consolidation

To formulate adaptive public policy governance strategies, this section employs a comparative case study approach. This methodological design extracts broader democratic principles—moving from local cases to global lessons—by evaluating Nigeria's digital governance constellation against two reference cases. The first examines youth advocacy dynamics in Kenya, representing an African hybrid regime prototype

characterized by a distinct degree of institutional responsiveness. The second analyzes the e-governance architecture of the Republic of Estonia, which exemplifies a consolidated democracy anchored in decentralization and data security. This upstream-to-downstream comparative evaluation yields a prescriptive synthesis comprising four legal policy and structural governance reforms for Nigeria.

In unpacking this comparative discourse, existing scholarship documents sharp divergences in how state institutions respond to cyber-mediated public participation. In the Kenyan context, a machine-learning sentiment analysis of the 2024 Finance Bill protests by Ndone and Carpenter highlights the potency of civic movements anchored on digital platforms.⁷⁷ Balkaran and Masha reinforce this empirical evidence, demonstrating Generation Z's pivotal role in reconfiguring Kenyan political stability,⁷⁸ while Kariuki and Gichanga document the tactical efficacy of social media as an advocacy coordination platform.⁷⁹ Kenya's articulatory ecosystem stands in stark contrast to governance practices in Nigeria, where Elega et al. demonstrate that state apparatuses respond aggressively to cyber protest dissemination by freezing social media operations and weaponizing mass surveillance algorithms.⁸⁰ Turning to European governance scholarship, Bole's case study and Akmentina's analytical review conclude that Estonia's e-governance infrastructure directly accelerates social inclusion and active electronic public deliberation (e-participation).^{81,82} A comprehensive comparison by Kyriaki Efthalitsidou et al. further confirms that a positive correlation among digital instruments,

⁷⁷ James Ndone and Nathan Carpenter, "Hashtags, Protests, and Polycrisis: A Machine Learning Analysis of Kenyans' Sentiments on the 2024 Finance Bill Protests Using X Data," *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, February 4, 2026, 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2026.2617236>.

⁷⁸ Sanjay Balkaran and Anthony Kambi Masha, "Digital Natives and Political Transformation: The Role of GEN Z in the 2024 Kenyan Uprising and Social Cohesion," *International Journal Of Humanities Education and Social Sciences (IJHES)* 5, no. 3 (December 28, 2025): 1594–1608, <https://doi.org/10.55227/ijhess.v5i3.1549>.

⁷⁹ Thomas N. Kariuki and Ruth Gichanga, "Social Media Coordination as a Strategic Messaging Platform for Political Advocacy in Kenya: A Case Study of Kenya's Gen Z Uprising in 2024," *African Multidisciplinary Journal of Research* 2, no. 2 (December 11, 2025): 100–124, <https://doi.org/10.71064/spu.amjr.2.2.2025.430>.

⁸⁰ Elega, Mohammed, and Oloyede, "The Fall of a Dry Leaf Is a Warning to the Green Ones': Exploring the Twitter Ban and the Impending Dangers of Data Politics, Algorithmic Governance, and Mass Surveillance in Nigeria."

⁸¹ Dhruv Kishore Bole, "Digital Technologies in Public Administration: A Case Study of Estonia's E-Governance For Inclusive and Sustainable Development," *UKLO Proceedings* 2, no. 1 (May 8, 2026): 84–102, <https://doi.org/10.20544/uklop.2026.616>.

⁸² Lita Akmentina, "E-Participation and Engagement in Urban Planning: Experiences from the Baltic Cities," *Urban Research & Practice* 16, no. 4 (August 8, 2023): 624–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2022.2068965>.

public funding efficiency, and democratic quality materializes only when the ecosystem rests on institutional compliance that minimizes autocratic practices.⁸³

Building on this scholarly dialogue, the comparative analysis identifies a fundamental divergence in institutional conflict-resolution outcomes between Nigeria and Kenya, despite nearly identical demographic pressures and structural unemployment ratios in both nations. In Kenya, citizens deployed platforms such as X and TikTok alongside generative artificial intelligence during public protests without triggering an absolute, state-imposed internet shutdown. Operating within a cyberspace free from radical restrictions, public pressure pierced executive institutional immunity. This mobilization shifted the policymaking equilibrium, ultimately compelling President William Ruto to withdraw the 2024 Finance Bill and subsequently dissolve and restructure his cabinet. Confronted with an analogous crisis of representation, Nigeria's state architecture instead defaulted to repressive tactics: tightening bureaucratic controls, enforcing cybercriminal penalties, and imposing outright bans on public platforms.

Juxtaposing Nigeria against Estonia's consolidated democracy demonstrates that sustainable digital transformation rests on the transparency of operational code rather than the mere physical installation of telecommunications infrastructure. Estonia's entire state data architecture operates on an encrypted, decentralized information exchange system known as *X-Road*. This technical backbone is paired with strict legal certainty and transparency guarantees, whereby civil authorities empower citizens to conduct independent audits tracking public agency access to their digital identity records. Delivering corruption-free bureaucratic services integrated with deliberative grievance mechanisms (e-participation) has systematically generated exceptionally high levels of institutional trust. Crucially, public confidence in the state's judicial protections functions as a vital retention mechanism that prevents the mass exodus of educated talent (brain drain). Table 3 synthesizes these comparative indicators, mapping the structural asymmetries and developmental outcomes across all three jurisdictions.

⁸³ Kyriaki Efthaltsidou et al., "Digital Governance, Democracy and Public Funding Efficiency in the EU-27: Comparative Insights with Emphasis on Greece," *Information* 16, no. 9 (September 12, 2025): 795, <https://doi.org/10.3390/info16090795>.

Table 3. Comparison of Digital Governance Architectures, Institutional Responses to Civic Participation, and Developmental Implications (Nigeria, Kenya, and Estonia)

Structural Evaluation Variable	Nigeria (Hybrid Electoral Regime)	Kenya (Responsive Transitional Regime)	Estonia (Consolidated Democracy)
Data Protection & Cybersecurity Framework	Centralized securitization approach; legal instruments prone to repression (cyberstalking); warrantless traffic log retention.	Moderate-reactive approach; partial restrictions without mass criminalization of digital infrastructure usage.	Technical-legal decentralization (<i>X-Road</i>); guaranteed citizen autonomy to conduct real-time audits.
Institutional Response to Digital Advocacy	Control operations, platform freezes, and the deployment of national security discourses to delegitimize civil society groups.	Absorption of aggregated demands; modification of administrative decisions (<i>Finance Bill</i>) and formal bureaucratic restructuring.	Systemic integration into national regulatory drafting (<i>e-participation</i>); public deliberation safeguarded by the judiciary.
Level of Public Institutional Trust	Low to stagnant; undermined by executive power asymmetries and acute administrative opacity.	Moderate fluctuations toward stability; incrementally rebuilt through transactional executive concessions.	Consistently high; anchored in predictable administrative service delivery and robust legal protections.
Talent Retention Impact (Brain Drain)	Investment dysfunction; massive depletion of state-subsidized talent toward the Global North (<i>Japa syndrome</i>).	Contained escalation; outward migration moderated by domestic regulatory and governance concessions.	Competitive investment advantage; localized talent accumulation and domestic circulation of innovation capital.

As detailed in Table 3, the deployment of information technology instruments remains subordinate to the constitutional architecture of the governing regime. Nigeria's governance deficits confirm that centralizing technological innovation without aligning accountability mechanisms risks constricting political participation and compelling productive talent to pursue economic disengagement from the state.

Translating these findings into concrete imperatives for legal reform and democratic consolidation, this study formulates four mandatory restructuring frameworks to be executed simultaneously:

First, *Synchronizing Economic Conversion Metric Architectures*. Public agencies and the policy review mechanisms of the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) must overhaul the success reporting model of the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* program. Evaluation frameworks can no longer rely on aggregate registration inputs; instead, they must be redesigned to track formal employment

outcomes (decent job placements), quarterly startup survival rates, and trajectories of real domestic purchasing power among post-training cohorts.

Second, *Enforcing National Data Sovereignty*. Every operational agreement governing digital registries that extract youth portfolio data and biometric records must mandate domestic server localization under the .ng top-level domain. Technology transfer partnerships that fail to meet this requirement—as exemplified by the Hello.cv data collection scheme—must be suspended and subjected to rigorous compliance audits by the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC) under the *Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023* to legally safeguard domestic intellectual property rights.

Third, *Decriminalizing Online Deliberative Spaces*. Sustaining digital investment growth requires eliminating the threat of constitutional repression. Parliamentary intervention is urgently needed to amend the *Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Amendment Act 2024* by narrowing the interpretive ambiguity of Section 24 and establishing an absolute statutory requirement that the retention and interception of communications traffic data on public infrastructure occur strictly under independent judicial warrant. This normative reform is essential to curb state abuse of authority while restoring the constitutional supremacy of free expression protections under Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution.

Fourth, *Transforming Talent Exodus (Japa) into Global Brain Circulation*. Fiscal intervention cannot end with the provision of cyber education curricula. Building long-term innovation resilience requires the federal government to establish strategic venture capital funding schemes governed by objective meritocracy and insulated from political patronage. Implementing targeted challenge procurement frameworks for domestic technology startups will create a vital domestic absorption net for local competencies. Ultimately, this policy shift will reorient technical education from an inadvertent subsidy for multinational corporations into a substantive mechanism for retaining the intellectual capital essential to national industrialization.

C. CONCLUSION

Operationalizing the capability approach, political opportunity structure theory, and the democratic backsliding framework demonstrates that Nigeria's digital economy initiatives—most notably the *Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)* program and broadband expansion—suffer from an acute structural conversion gap. By prioritizing

registration quotas over substantive outcomes, state policy fails to overcome grassroots hardware affordability barriers or the limited absorptive capacity of an overwhelmingly informal labor market. Moreover, youth empowerment is actively undermined by compromised data sovereignty, warrantless surveillance and overbroad cyberstalking provisions under the *Cybercrimes Amendment Act 2024*, and unconstitutional social media suspensions. The convergence of obstructed formal representation, cyberspace securitization, and macroeconomic distress has consequently bifurcated youth agency into extra-parliamentary digital protest (#EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance) and skilled labor emigration (*Japa*), effectively subsidizing Global North economies with domestically trained talent. Drawing on comparative lessons from youth advocacy in Kenya and Estonia's decentralized *X-Road* architecture, achieving inclusive digital transformation in Nigeria requires four interlocking reforms: aligning training metrics with formal job creation, enforcing domestic data localization under independent regulatory oversight, decriminalizing online civic space through judicial warrants, and establishing merit-based public procurement to convert brain drain into domestic innovation circulation.

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