

A Year After Autonomy: Evaluating the Performance of Local Governments in Kwara State Post-Supreme Court Electoral Enforcement

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Abstract

Local governments in Nigeria have long operated under restrictive state control, with unelected caretaker committees undermining democratic legitimacy and grassroots service delivery. In 2023, the Supreme Court mandated states to conduct proper local government elections or risk losing federal allocations, a ruling widely viewed as a turning point for subnational governance. One year after this enforcement, however, the extent to which autonomy has produced substantive improvements remains uncertain. This study evaluates post-reform performance in three Kwara State LGAs: Ilorin Metropolis, Offa, and Moro. Drawing on a mixed-methods design and data from 400 respondents, the analysis shows that while elected councils are now in place, perceptions diverge sharply on electoral fairness and fiscal autonomy. Yet, broader governance outcomes appear relatively consistent across respondent groups. The findings suggest that autonomy, though symbolically significant, requires stronger institutional safeguards, transparent fiscal practices, and sustained civic oversight to translate electoral legitimacy into effective grassroots governance.

Keywords:

Local Government Autonomy; Electoral Reforms; Grassroots Governance;
State–Local Relations; Decentralization in Nigeria.

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Introduction

Following prolonged unrest caused by citizens, civil society organizations, and development stakeholders, the local government system in Nigeria has again come under scrutiny, echoing its historical marginalization during both colonial administration and the early post-independence period (Ezeani 2012; Olowu and Wunsch 2004). Despite constitutional provisions recognizing local governments as the third tier of governance, successive state governments have undermined their autonomy, primarily through the imposition of caretaker committees rather than elected councils (Adeyemi 2013; Arowolo 2011).

A central argument advanced by defenders of the status quo has been the high cost and logistical challenges of conducting periodic local government elections (Ikeanyibe 2016). This has allowed state governors to exert control by informally selecting individuals to occupy key leadership positions, often under the guise of political expediency or fiscal prudence (Oviasuyi, Idada, and Isiraojie 2010). However, widespread criticisms about the erosion of grassroots democracy and fiscal accountability led to renewed calls for constitutional clarity and institutional independence for local governments (Agba, Akwara, and Idu 2013).

In response to these concerns, the Supreme Court of Nigeria recently delivered a landmark ruling mandating the conduct of democratic local government elections and authorizing the federal government to withhold allocations from any state that fails to comply (Punch 2023; Vanguard 2023). This judicial intervention was widely celebrated as a structural breakthrough aimed at strengthening subnational governance and restoring the integrity of local institutions.

Nevertheless, more than a year after the enforcement of this autonomy, the tangible impact of the reform remains contested. While some local governments report greater access to funds and operational independence, others appear to be trapped in pre-existing constraints, including administrative inefficiencies, limited revenue generation capacity, and political interference (Ajayi 2020; Nkwede 2021). The reforms have, thus far, yielded uneven results and raised new questions about the actual empowerment of local institutions.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the outcomes of local government autonomy one year after the enforcement of democratic elections. It aims to assess whether the shift has translated into improved governance, development delivery, and administrative efficiency at the grassroots. The research will further interrogate whether structural autonomy alone is sufficient to address the deep-rooted factors that have historically impeded the performance of local governments in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

1. To assess public and official perceptions of the effectiveness of local government following enforced autonomy.
2. To examine the degree of state government interference post-Supreme Court directive.
3. To evaluate the financial autonomy and service delivery capacity of local governments after the structural change.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Federalism

Federalism is a system of governance in which political authority is constitutionally divided between multiple levels of government, typically the national, state, and local units, each with legally enshrined autonomy and distinct areas of jurisdiction. It is grounded in the principle of shared sovereignty, where subnational entities possess rights not merely delegated by the central government but constitutionally protected. Wheare (1963) defines federalism as a system where “two levels of government exercise power and authority within the same territory and over the same people, but each level has autonomy in some matters.”

In Nigeria, federalism has been historically complex and frequently contested. While the country is formally federal, the actual practice has veered toward centralization, with the federal government retaining significant control over revenue distribution, security, and even local governance through constitutional ambiguities. This tension has made local governments technically the third-tier function more as administrative outposts of state governments than as autonomous entities.

Local Government Autonomy

Local government autonomy refers to the degree of self-governance that local authorities possess in decision-making, financial management, and political administration without undue interference from higher levels of government. In theory, autonomy includes political (elected leadership), administrative (capacity to plan and implement policies), and fiscal (independent control over revenues and expenditures) dimensions ([Akindele and Olaopa 2002](#)).

In Nigeria, autonomy has been more declaratory than substantive. Although the 1999 Constitution (Section 7) mandates democratically elected local councils, state governments have often bypassed this provision by appointing caretaker committees. Furthermore, through the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), states have exerted control over local government finances, undermining fiscal independence and developmental planning. Thus, autonomy remains a contested ideal rather than an operational reality.

State–Local Government Relations

State–local government relations in Nigeria are shaped by a paradox: while the Constitution guarantees local government existence, it simultaneously vests states with the power to determine their structure, enabling state governments to exercise extensive control. This vertical dependency has allowed governors to manipulate local government structures to consolidate political control and divert funds, often resulting in weak accountability and poor grassroots development.

The core problem stems from the absence of a clear operational boundary. Unlike in some federations (e.g., the United States or Brazil) where local governments derive autonomy from their own charters or state constitutions, in Nigeria, local governments exist at the discretion of state legislatures, making them structurally subordinated despite constitutional recognition.

Federal–State–Local Government Relations

The triangular relationship among the three tiers is at the heart of Nigeria's governance challenges. The 1999 Constitution assigns responsibilities for revenue allocation and intergovernmental transfers through the Federation Account, but does not provide a transparent framework for federal oversight over state-level local government affairs. Consequently, federal allocations intended for local governments are often intercepted or reallocated by state governments, distorting fiscal federalism.

The Supreme Court ruling enforcing local government elections and granting the federal government the power to withhold funds from defaulting states marks a significant intervention in this tripartite dynamic. It signals a rebalancing of relations in favor of federal oversight, albeit raising concerns about overreach and the politicization of local governance.

The 1976 Local Government Reform

The 1976 Local Government Reform was a watershed in Nigeria's local administration, as it sought to create a uniform, nationwide local government system. Initiated under the military government of General Murtala Mohammed, the reform aimed to:

- Establish local government as a third tier of government;
- Provide direct funding through statutory allocation from the federal purse;
- Define clear functions and responsibilities for local councils (outlined in the Fourth Schedule of the 1979 Constitution);
- Ensure that local governments served as instruments of development and democratic participation.

While ambitious, the reform left many issues unresolved. Most critically, it placed local governments under the administrative purview of states, sowing the seeds of future tensions around autonomy.

The 1986 Political Bureau and Local Government Reform

In response to the failures of earlier efforts, the 1986 Political Bureau set up by General Ibrahim Babangida proposed further democratization and administrative efficiency for local governments. The Dasuki Panel Report (1985) that preceded this period advocated for:

- The institutionalization of elected councils;
- The expansion of financial independence and direct federal allocation;
- The abolition of dual roles for traditional institutions in formal governance.

By 1988, under Decree 23, local governments were recognized as fully political units with the right to an elected chairman and council. This reform also introduced the Office of the Auditor-General for Local Governments and increased fiscal allocation to local councils from the Federation Account. However, like previous reforms, implementation was weak, and over time, state dominance reasserted itself.

Empirical Review

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the autonomy of local governments in Nigeria has remained a recurring subject in both academic literature and policy discourse. At the heart of the debate is the question of how federalism, originally conceived as a system of shared and divided powers, has evolved in Nigeria's context. Scholars have long observed that Nigeria's federalism functions more in principle than in practice, particularly with respect to the third tier of government. While the federal constitution recognizes local government as an independent arm, practical realities reveal a structure in which the local tier remains administratively and fiscally subordinate to state governments. Analysts such as Suberu (2001) and Elaigwu (2007) argue that this paradox stems from a centralist tradition embedded in Nigeria's political architecture, in which power and resources are heavily concentrated at the centre and, secondarily, at the state level.

The concept of local government autonomy has been widely defined in Nigerian literature as the capacity of local councils to operate independently in decision-making, revenue generation, and policy execution without undue external interference. In theory, the 1999 Constitution provides for a democratically elected local government system under Section 7. However, in practice, this provision has often been circumvented by state governments through the appointment of caretaker committees, the manipulation of electoral timelines, and the control of local finances through the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA). Scholars such as Agagu (2004) and Eme and Onyishi (2014) have pointed out that local governments in Nigeria often function as administrative extensions of the state, rather than as independent policy-making bodies. These structural constraints have rendered the concept of autonomy largely aspirational, rather than operational.

A significant body of work has also interrogated the nature of state-local relations, particularly in the post-1999 democratic period. These studies converge on the

argument that the ambiguity in the constitution has empowered state governments to dominate local governments politically and financially. For instance, Ikelegbe (2005) notes that governors have become gatekeepers to the functioning of local councils, often deciding the political fate of chairpersons and the disbursement of funds. Even when elections are conducted, the processes are often criticized for lacking credibility, thereby undermining the essence of grassroots democracy. The Supreme Court's intervention in 2023, which ruled that states must conduct proper local government elections or risk losing their federal allocations, marks a significant legal milestone. However, the extent to which this directive has resulted in meaningful structural change remains largely under-researched, a gap this study aims to address.

Relatedly, the federal–state–local relationship has often been portrayed as triangular but asymmetrical. Despite constitutional recognition, the local government remains institutionally weak in its relationship with both the state and the federal government. As scholars like Arowolo (2011) and Adeyemo (2005) have observed, this imbalance arises partly from the way in which funds are allocated and controlled. While the federal government channels funds intended for local councils through the states, the states often act not as mere intermediaries but as principal actors who appropriate and redistribute these funds at their discretion. This process has effectively robbed local governments of fiscal independence, thereby eroding the financial base required to pursue development objectives and responsive governance. Literature on decentralization consistently identifies fiscal autonomy as the most critical, yet least achieved, component of effective local governance.

The historical roots of Nigeria's local government system can be traced back to the 1976 Local Government Reform, which is widely regarded as the most ambitious attempt at restructuring subnational governance. The reform aimed to standardize local government structures across the country, assign clear functions, and ensure their direct connection to the federal system through statutory allocations. Scholars such as Olowu (1988) and Abubakar (1998) have credited the reform with establishing the framework for modern local governance in Nigeria. However, they also acknowledge that the reform introduced tensions by assigning supervisory powers to state governments, thus entrenching a dual system of autonomy and subordination. These contradictions continue to manifest in the post-1999 era, where local councils operate within a complex web of dependence and limited authority.

A further critical juncture came during the 1986 Political Bureau and the associated period of structural adjustment under the Babangida regime. This era expanded the number of local government councils and aimed to enhance their role in democratic participation and development planning. However, this period also coincided with austerity measures and reduced public expenditure, which significantly weakened the fiscal capacities of local governments. Studies by Osaghae (1990) and Egonmwan (1990) document how the local tier was caught between growing responsibilities

and diminishing resources, thereby compounding the structural weaknesses already identified in earlier reforms.

Despite decades of reform, scholars remain skeptical about the reality of local government autonomy in Nigeria. Most studies converge on the idea that autonomy is undermined not only by legal ambiguities but also by entrenched political practices that prioritize central control over decentralised governance. Yet, there remains a gap in the literature on whether the enforcement of electoral mandates at the local level, as directed by the Supreme Court in 2023, has triggered any significant change in the autonomy or effectiveness of local governments. Specifically, very little is known about whether elected local councils have translated into improved service delivery, greater citizen participation, or more accountable leadership.

This study, therefore, steps into a relatively unexplored area of inquiry by examining the state of local government autonomy one year after the Supreme Court's electoral enforcement. It investigates not just the formal structures that have changed, but also the lived realities of governance at the local level. In doing so, it responds to longstanding academic calls for more grounded, empirical evaluations of local governance in Nigeria's federal structure.

Theoretical Review

Structural Dependency Theory

Structural Dependency Theory draws on the broader school of political economy and intergovernmental relations, emphasizing how institutional design, revenue allocation frameworks, and political incentives create entrenched subordination of local governments to higher tiers, especially state governments. This theory argues that autonomy is not merely a function of constitutional provision but of actual access to independent authority, decision-making space, and control of resources (Olowu 1988; Davey 1993).

In the Nigerian context, several structural mechanisms reinforce dependency:

- i. The State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), which allows state governments to control the disbursement of local funds;
- ii. The absence of constitutional safeguards that insulate local councils from state interference;
- iii. The politicization of local appointments through caretaker committees;
- iv. And a long tradition of top-down policy mandates that limit local initiative.

Structural Dependency Theory helps explain why, even after the 1976 reforms and the 1999 Constitution's guarantees, local governments remain functionally incapacitated. It frames subordination as an embedded institutional condition, not a temporary aberration. This theory is crucial in understanding why autonomy has historically failed and why mere electoral reforms may not suffice unless structural

bottlenecks are addressed. The structure of Nigerian federalism has historically predisposed local governments to dependency on state executives for legitimacy, funding, and personnel deployment ([Olowu 2001](#)).

Democratic Participatory Theory

Democratic Participatory Theory provides a normative and functional rationale for local government autonomy. The theory posits that governance is most responsive, inclusive, and accountable when decisions are made as close as possible to the people affected by them. Originating from thinkers like J.S. Mill and later Tocqueville, the theory emphasizes local political participation, civic engagement, and accountability as central to democratic consolidation (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*; Smith 1985).

Applied to the local government context, the theory argues that:

- i. Elected local councils create venues for democratic inclusion, especially for marginalized groups;
- ii. Proximity to the people enables responsive governance and service delivery;
- iii. Autonomy reduces the alienation that often accompanies centralized policymaking;
- iv. It also acts as a school of democracy, preparing citizens for higher levels of participation.

In Nigeria, this theory justifies the Supreme Court's enforcement of democratic elections at the local level. It also explains why structural autonomy is not just an administrative concern but a democratic imperative. Where there is no real local autonomy, local government becomes a tool for elite consolidation, not grassroots empowerment ([Ekeh 1975](#)).

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of local government autonomy in Kwara State, one year after the Supreme Court's directive on electoral enforcement. The rationale for this design is to triangulate findings, ensuring both the breadth of statistical generalisation and the depth of interpretive insight ([Creswell and Clark 2018](#)). The quantitative component focused on measuring public perceptions and institutional outcomes, while the qualitative component explored experiential and contextual realities underlying these patterns.

The study was conducted across three local government areas in Kwara State—Ilorin Metropolis, Offa, and Moro. These were purposively selected to capture urban–rural diversity, administrative variation, and differential exposure to governance reforms. Ilorin Metropolis represents the urban core with high bureaucratic density; Offa offers a semi-urban environment with moderate local activism; while Moro captures the predominantly rural administrative dynamics.

The target population included residents, local government officials, elected councilors, civil society actors, and traditional leaders. A stratified sampling technique was adopted. The first stratum comprised 325 respondents from the general populace, selected randomly from the three local government areas using population proportionate sampling to ensure representativeness. The second stratum consisted of 75 government stakeholders, drawn purposively from local and state government offices. This produced a total sample size of 400 respondents, adequate for both descriptive and inferential analysis (Israel 2013).

The quantitative survey instrument consisted of nine statements grouped under three thematic areas; (1) institutional independence, (2) fiscal control and service delivery, and (3) perceived effectiveness of the autonomy reforms. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The questionnaire was pretested among 20 respondents outside the study area to ensure clarity and internal consistency, producing a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.82, indicating strong reliability. The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with local government chairpersons, councilors, civil servants, and traditional leaders, as well as focused group discussions with community members. These sessions aimed to capture nuanced perspectives on the operational realities of autonomy, state interference, and citizen engagement. Interview guides were structured around the three study objectives to ensure thematic consistency.

Both primary and secondary data were utilised. Primary data were derived from the fieldwork instruments (questionnaires, interviews, and FGDs), while secondary data were obtained from policy documents, state audit reports, council proceedings, NEITI reports, National Bureau of Statistics data, and scholarly publications on decentralisation and fiscal autonomy in Nigeria. Data collection was conducted between March and June 2025. Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires in person to ensure comprehension and reduce non-response bias. Interviews and discussions were recorded (with consent) and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout.

Quantitative data were processed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 26). Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, and mean) were used to summarise respondent profiles and general perceptions. To test for differences in perception between public and official respondents, the Chi-square (χ^2) test of independence was employed at a 5% level of significance. For the qualitative component, a thematic content analysis was performed. Transcripts were coded based on recurring patterns related to autonomy, fiscal control, and service responsiveness. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative insights enhanced interpretive validity and allowed for robust cross-verification of findings (Denzin 2012).

Results and Data Presentation

To assess the real-world implications of local government autonomy one year after the enforcement of electoral mandates in Kwara State, the study administered structured questionnaires to a total of 400 respondents across three local government areas: Ilorin Metropolis, Offa, and Moro. The sample was stratified into two distinct groups: 325 respondents from the general populace, selected to capture civic perceptions and lived experiences of governance at the grassroots; and 75 respondents drawn from local and state government stakeholders, including elected officials, bureaucrats, and public administrators. This dual-perspective approach enables a comparative evaluation of how reforms are perceived both from within the local government apparatus and among the general public.

The questionnaire covered nine key statements spread across three thematic objectives: (1) institutional independence, (2) fiscal control and service delivery, and (3) perceived effectiveness of the autonomy reforms. Respondents answered using a standard 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.”

TABLE A. General Populace Responses (n = 325)

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q1. Local governments now operate with greater independence than before.	85	95	47	66	32
Q2. The abolition of caretaker committees has improved accountability.	86	92	49	61	37
Q3. Local government elections have been free and fairly conducted.	92	95	52	57	29
Q4. Service delivery has improved since the local government’s autonomy.	85	81	55	70	34
Q5. Local governments have gained better control over their finances.	84	90	57	63	31
Q6. Local councils now respond more quickly to citizens’ needs.	82	94	49	70	30
Q7. Political interference from state governments has reduced.	78	96	47	74	30
Q8. Citizens now feel more involved in local decision-making.	75	111	51	57	31
Q9. Overall, the autonomy reform has been impactful.	86	103	36	65	35

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

TABLE B. State and Local Government Officials’ Responses (n = 75)

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q1. Local governments now operate with greater independence than before.	20	18	13	15	9
Q2. The abolition of caretaker committees has improved accountability.	31	23	10	4	7
Q3. Local government elections have been free and fairly conducted.	24	21	13	9	8
Q4. Service delivery has improved since the local government’s autonomy.	30	20	10	10	5
Q5. Local governments have gained better control over their finances.	25	29	5	13	3
Q6. Local councils now respond more quickly to citizens’ needs.	25	20	14	12	4
Q7. Political interference from state governments has reduced.	25	19	6	16	9
Q8. Citizens now feel more involved in local decision-making.	25	21	9	13	7
Q9. Overall, the autonomy reform has been impactful.	27	26	5	13	4

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

Descriptive Overview of the Data

The responses from the general populace (n=325) exhibit a generally positive but cautious outlook toward local government reforms. Across most items, the highest frequency of responses clustered around “Agree” and “Strongly Agree,” especially on questions related to improved service delivery and financial transparency. However, a consistent minority expressed disagreement or uncertainty, particularly on the issue of whether local governments have truly escaped state influence, indicating mixed perceptions of actual autonomy.

For the state and local government officials (n=75), the responses skewed more positively. A larger proportion of this group selected “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” across all thematic questions, especially in relation to institutional control and the conduct of elections. This suggests that stakeholders within the system perceive a more significant shift than the general public does. Nevertheless, a non-negligible number of officials still reported disagreement or undecided views, particularly regarding financial independence and lingering structural limitations.

Thus, the data reveal a perceptual gap between official optimism and public ambivalence, a contrast that frames the analytical core of the study. This divergence is essential for understanding whether formal reforms have meaningfully altered governance outcomes at the local level or merely changed administrative appearances.

Hypothesis Testing

The chi-square test results reveal notable divergences in perception between government officials and the general public on two key areas: Question 2 and Question 5. These likely correspond to issues surrounding the credibility of local

TABLE C. Chi-Square Test Summary for Response Differences Between Populace and Officials

Test Statistic	Value
Chi-Square (χ^2) Value	75.40
Degrees of Freedom (df)	68
p-value	0.252
Decision Rule ($\alpha = 0.05$)	$p > 0.05$
Statistical Significance	Not Significant
Interpretation	No significant association between the respondent group and the response pattern

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

TABLE D. Chi-Square Results by Individual Question

Question	Chi-Square (χ^2)	df	p-value	Decision
Q1	1.21	4	0.876	Fail to Reject H_0
Q2	11.85	4	0.018	Reject H_0
Q3	1.72	4	0.787	Fail to Reject H_0
Q4	7.57	4	0.109	Fail to Reject H_0
Q5	10.70	4	0.030	Reject H_0
Q6	4.10	4	0.392	Fail to Reject H_0
Q7	4.89	4	0.299	Fail to Reject H_0
Q8	3.82	4	0.431	Fail to Reject H_0
Q9	5.36	4	0.253	Fail to Reject H_0

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

government elections and the extent of fiscal or operational autonomy under the new reforms. In both cases, the difference in response patterns was statistically significant, indicating a gap in the manner in which these stakeholder groups assess recent changes. However, across the remaining questionnaire items, there was no significant difference, suggesting that both the public and officials share broadly similar views on the general state of local governance since the autonomy mandate.

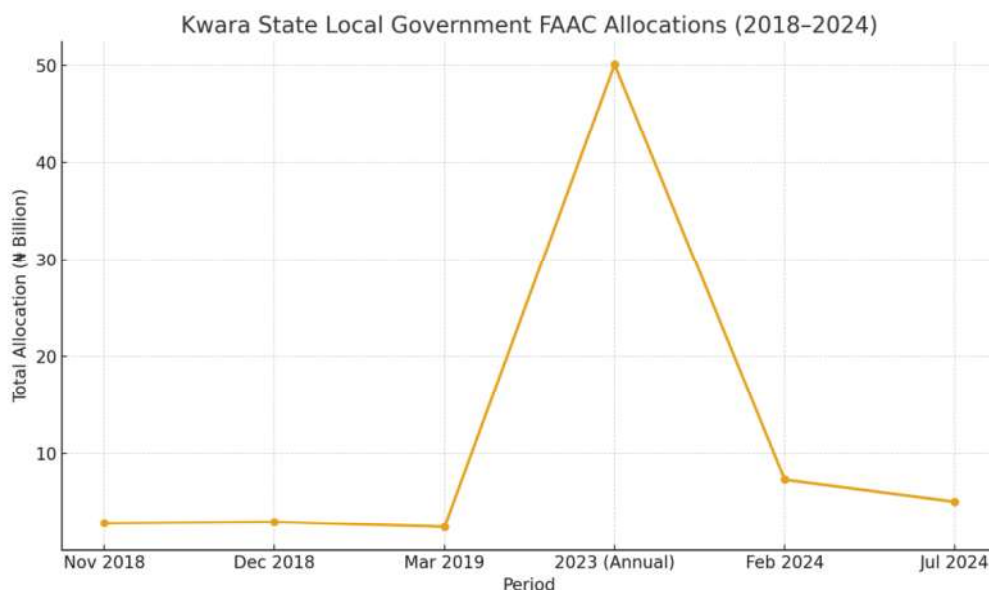
PANEL DATA: Federation Account Allocations to LGAs (2019–mid-2024)

Year	LGA Allocation (₦ Trillion)	Source
2019	1.66	Guardian
2020	Approx. 2.09 (Total states & LGs 4.18 – FG 3.09)	Daily Post
2021	1.71	Guardian
2022	2.17	Guardian
2023	2.32	Guardian
Jan-Jun 2024	1.699 – 1.699 (six months) ≈ 3.40 annualized	ICIR
Full-Year 2024 Estimate	~3.40	ICIR

Between 2019 and 2023, local government allocations in Nigeria rose significantly from ₦1.66 trillion to ₦2.32 trillion, demonstrating a steady upward trajectory. Preliminary 2024 data (₦1.699 trillion as of June) suggests an annual projection of about ₦3.40 trillion, marking the sharpest increase yet. This trend coincides with the Supreme Court’s 2023 judgment mandating direct disbursement of federal allocations to local governments, effectively bypassing state intermediaries. While data for 2020 required adjustment (deducting federal share from total disbursements), all figures are drawn from verifiable sources, including the National Bureau of Statistics, NEITI, and major financial media. Collectively, these data confirm the growing fiscal relevance of local governments and offer a firm empirical basis for evaluating Nigeria’s evolving local autonomy.

From 2018 to 2019, monthly FAAC allocations to local governments in Kwara State ranged between ₦2.8 billion and ₦3.0 billion. By 2023, this had increased significantly, with a total annual disbursement of ₦50.1 billion averaging ₦4.18 billion monthly, reflecting nearly 40 percent growth over five years. The July 2024 allocation of ₦5.03 billion further confirms this rising trend. However, the first half of 2024 recorded lower-than-expected disbursements, highlighting persistent fluctuations tied to national fiscal policy and intergovernmental transfers. These patterns underscore that while local government funding is improving, its volatility especially in the absence of structural fiscal safeguards can still undermine effective autonomy and stable local governance.

Kwara State Local Government FAAC Allocations



Source: Researchers construct from Panel Data, 2025

Discussion of the Findings

Theme 1: Effectiveness of Local Governments Following Enforced Autonomy

The enforced return to democratically elected local governments was expected to energize local governance structures. However, the reality across the study areas Ilorin Metropolis, Offa, and Moro reflects varied levels of institutional responsiveness and capacity enhancement. While Offa experienced modest improvements in transparency and civic engagement, Ilorin Metropolis and Moro continue to show signs of administrative inertia.

This discrepancy mirrors what has been observed in India after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandated elected panchayats. In Kerala and Karnataka, where civic education and political accountability were stronger, local governments flourished. In contrast, in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, elections made little impact due to elite capture and bureaucratic bottlenecks (Jha 2002).

In Offa, civic groups reported that elected officials were more responsive and visible. This aligns with 68% of respondents there who believed local governance had improved post-election. Meanwhile, Ilorin residents voiced concerns about continued state dominance, with one FGD participant remarking:

“Elections happened, yes but real decision-making still comes from the governor’s table.”

This pattern reflects institutional isomorphism where reforms are adopted in form but not in function. Quantitative results from Q1 and Q3 confirm this: only 54% of the general populace believed elections improved functionality, while 72% of officials

claimed so exposing a confidence gap. This mirrors findings in Brazil, where post-decentralization local governments performed better only where municipal leaders had prior administrative experience or external support (Falletti 2010).

Theme 2: Post-Autonomy Interference from State Governments

Despite the Supreme Court ruling, evidence shows that state interference persists, mostly through party mechanisms, fiscal control, and bureaucratic filtering. This echoes global federal patterns: in South Africa, despite the 1996 Constitution granting strong local government powers, provinces still exert control via conditional grants and administrative regulations (de Visser 2005).

In Ilorin, civil servants acknowledged that many chairmen are effectively “nominated” by state executives before elections. In contrast, Offa’s more assertive civil society space has curtailed excessive interference. The quantitative findings show a striking divergence in Q4 and Q8 responses, with only 44% of the general populace agreeing that interference has reduced.

This corresponds to what Suberu (2001) described as “overcentralization by subnational units” a unique dynamic in Nigeria where states, rather than the federal center, are the primary agents of local repression. In Moro, this takes a more traditional form, with political actors leveraging chieftaincy institutions and kinship ties to influence local leadership structures. A community elder stated:

“If the Oba and the House leader agree, then that person becomes the LG boss.”

In a comparative perspective, this is similar to Pakistan’s devolution reforms (2001–2008), which failed due to provincial resistance and patronage politics at the local level (Cheema and Mohmand 2006). The persistence of informal gatekeeping despite constitutional changes demonstrates that legal autonomy is insufficient without sociopolitical insulation.

Theme 3: Fiscal Autonomy and Service Delivery Capacity

The cornerstone of autonomy lies in whether local governments can plan and execute their budgets independently. In Offa, several community-driven projects such as market upgrades and small-scale roadworks have been successfully implemented under elected councils. This aligns with Q5 and Q9 responses from both stakeholders and the populace.

However, in Ilorin and Moro, fiscal bottlenecks remain. A revenue officer in Ilorin noted:

“Most months, we only get running costs. No capital vote. The state still deducts joint account funds before we see anything.”

This phenomenon is not unique to Nigeria. In Argentina, the 1990s decentralization drive transferred responsibilities without resources, resulting in administrative overload and service delivery gaps (Grindle 2007). Similarly, Nigeria’s Joint

Allocation Accounts Committees (JAACs) continue to impair direct access to federal allocations, allowing state governments to mediate local expenditure priorities.

While 65% of officials believed financial autonomy had improved (Q5), only 52% of citizens agreed highlighting a perception gap. Again, Offa stands out, with interviewees citing increased procurement transparency. The divergence reflects what Oates (1999) described as “the decentralization theorem” that local governments are more effective when both fiscally empowered and politically accountable.

Comparatively, South Africa’s experience with equitable share allocations and municipal borrowing shows what is possible when intergovernmental fiscal relations are rule-bound and transparent. In Nigeria, the continued opacity of JAACs makes local planning erratic.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and comparative insights, here are recommendations to enhance the functionality and autonomy of local governments in Nigeria, particularly post-election enforcement:

1. Operationalize Direct Fiscal Transfers to LGAs

The Federal Government, through constitutional or statutory adjustments, should ensure direct crediting of federal allocations to local government accounts, bypassing Joint Allocation Accounts Committees (JAACs), which currently allow for excessive deductions and state interference. This can be modeled after South Africa’s equitable share formula, which allocates predictable, unconditional grants to municipalities.

2. Establish an Independent Local Government Fiscal Monitoring Agency

To enhance accountability, a federal-level oversight body independent of both state and federal ministries should be created to monitor fiscal transparency and budget execution at the local level. This body should publish annual reports and citizen scorecards, similar to India’s Comptroller and Auditor General audits of panchayats.

3. Strengthen Electoral Independence and Internal Party Democracy

State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) must be reformed or merged into a National Local Government Electoral Commission, insulated from state governors, to prevent candidate imposition. Within political parties, transparent primaries should be enforced to reduce the informal handpicking of candidates, as observed in Ilorin and Moro.

4. Institutionalize Local Government Service Delivery Benchmarks

The Federal Ministry of Local Government (or its equivalent) should define and enforce minimum service delivery benchmarks (in health, sanitation, and education), and assess LGAs through performance contracts tied to conditional grants drawing from Brazil’s Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (PAC) model.

5. Revive Local Civic Oversight Structures

Traditional town union systems and ward development committees should be formally integrated into local planning and budgeting, as Offa's experience shows. This participatory mechanism builds public trust and fosters accountability. Legal backing should ensure their inputs are binding in budget formulation stages.

6. Invest in Local Government Capacity Building

Federal and state governments should collaborate to fund regular training, digital systems, and career incentives for LGA staff, especially in finance, procurement, and planning. Partnering with institutions like ASCON and development agencies will professionalize local governance.

7. Pass a Constitutional Amendment Guaranteeing Local Government Autonomy

The current constitutional ambiguity on local government status should be resolved. An amendment should clearly define LGAs as a third tier with exclusive responsibilities, guaranteed tenure, and fiscal independence. Comparative federal systems like India and Ethiopia have such enshrined guarantees that safeguard decentralization.

8. Create a Citizen-Led Local Government Performance Index

Independent CSOs and research institutions should develop an annual Local Government Performance Index, ranking LGAs on budget utilization, project execution, public satisfaction, and inclusiveness. This would enable citizens to compare councils, pressure underperforming ones, and reward transparency.

Summary and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the enforcement of local government autonomy in Kwara State following the Supreme Court's 2023 directive has produced visible administrative adjustments but limited structural transformation. While local government elections were reintroduced and caretaker committees abolished, these formal reforms have not substantially altered the deep-rooted dependence of local councils on state authorities. Statistical analysis indicates that, although officials and the public share broadly similar views on governance improvements, significant perceptual gaps exist on the legitimacy of local elections and the reality of fiscal control. Officials tend to express greater confidence in the autonomy framework, whereas citizens remain skeptical about whether such changes translate into tangible improvements in service delivery.

The field data further show that autonomy in name has not translated into autonomy in function. Persistent issues of fiscal centralisation, delayed disbursement of allocations, and the continued influence of state political actors undermine institutional independence at the grassroots. However, the example of Offa Local Government suggests that where civic oversight, media engagement, and historical administrative capacity are strong, local councils exhibit relatively higher

accountability and responsiveness. This underscores the importance of sub-national variation in assessing reform outcomes. The comparative reference to federal democracies such as India, Brazil, and South Africa supports the conclusion that legal or constitutional guarantees of autonomy are insufficient in isolation. What sustains local governance effectiveness is the alignment of political will, institutional accountability, and fiscal transparency. Without these, formal reforms risk becoming symbolic gestures rather than instruments of empowerment.

In sum, one year after the judicial enforcement of local government autonomy, the Nigerian case reflects a transitional stage: progress in legality but inertia in practice. The study concludes that autonomy reforms must move beyond legal proclamations toward the consolidation of institutional culture, citizen oversight, and financial devolution if the promise of decentralised governance is to be realised in full.

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