


JOHN RAWLS AND THE PURSUIT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This article examines the potential application of John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness to the contemporary sociopolitical situation in Nigeria. With a population of over 235 million people representing diverse ethnic and religious groups, Nigeria faces significant challenges in achieving social justice, including widespread inequality, systemic corruption, ethnic tensions, and inadequate resource allocation. Drawing on a philosophical analysis informed by Rawlsian principles, this article explores how concepts such as the original position, the veil of ignorance, and the difference principle can help Nigeria overcome long-standing problems of governance and equality. Using critical analysis and theoretical application, the study demonstrates that while Rawls's framework has the potential to transform Nigeria, its implementation faces significant practical challenges, including deep-rooted corruption, systems of ethnic patronage, and historical inequalities. This article offers recommendations for adapting Rawls's theory of justice to the Nigerian context, focusing on institutional reforms, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive governance. Combining political philosophy with practical governance strategies, this analysis contributes to ongoing debates about social justice, democratic consolidation, and sustainable development in Africa's most populous country.

Keywords: *John Rawls, social justice, Nigeria, distributive justice, democratic theory, equity, governance, Nigerian democratic society, political transformations.*

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Introduction

Contemporary Nigeria stands at a critical juncture in its developmental trajectory. Despite being Africa's largest economy and most populous nation, Nigeria continues to grapple with pervasive inequality, systemic corruption, and deep-seated ethnic divisions that undermine social cohesion and stability. The philosophical quest for social justice—a society where all citizens have access to basic rights, opportunities, and resources—remains an elusive ideal in the Nigerian context. This article examines how John Rawls' theory of justice, developed in the late 20th century, might provide a framework for addressing Nigeria's persistent challenges of injustice and oppression (Edogiawerie and Ekuase 2021; Yusuf and Shugaba 2024).

The relevance of Rawls' philosophy to Nigeria emerges from the nation's peculiar historical circumstances. As noted by researchers, Nigeria's political structure is characterized by "a lopsided political structure and sentiments of ethnic politics that stand to hurt the existence of a just society" (Orji 2023, 83). These foundational challenges create barriers to establishing a democratic community capable of ensuring Nigeria's political and socio-economic progress. The country's experience with military rule, patrimonial governance, and resource curse has produced a society where institutional arrangements consistently benefit powerful elites at the expense of the general populace (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 220-229).

This article argues that Rawls' theory of justice offers valuable insights for reimagining Nigeria's social contract, although its application requires contextual adaptation. Rawls' conception of justice as fairness provides a moral framework grounded in principles that rational individuals would choose under conditions of freedom and equality (Okaneme 2020). By situating Rawls' theory within Nigeria's unique socio-political landscape, this analysis contributes to both philosophical discourse and practical policy formulation for social justice.

The methodology employed is qualitative and conceptual, drawing on philosophical analysis and theoretical application. The article examines primary Rawlsian texts alongside secondary literature applying his theory to African contexts. Nigerian case studies and empirical data inform the analysis of whether Rawls' principles—developed primarily within Western philosophical traditions—can meaningfully address justice questions in Nigeria's distinct cultural and political environment.

John Rawls' Theory of Justice

John Rawls' theory of justice, articulated most comprehensively in his seminal work "A Theory of Justice" (1971), represents one of the most influential contributions to political philosophy in the twentieth century. Rawls developed his conception as an alternative to utilitarianism, seeking to establish a more satisfactory foundation for a just society. His theory revolves around several core concepts that provide the framework for justice as fairness.

The relevance of this study stems from the fact that justice is considered one of the most complex categories in social and philosophical thought, affecting various spheres of public life in Nigeria (Richman 2022; Kachembere 2026). Concepts of justice in contemporary Nigerian society serve as a value criterion for analyzing social reality

and addressing issues of changing social relations. Assessing various phenomena in Nigerian society as just or unjust reflects the economic, political, legal, and social conditions that give rise to them. The significance of social justice in Nigerian society is determined by the following key factors: first, the need to theoretically develop a model of a just society against the backdrop of persistent and deepening socioeconomic inequality and the violation of democratic rights and freedoms. Second, it has practical significance, as an analysis of existing and implemented principles of justice may enable the design and implementation of fair and effective social policies in the future. Social and historical practice demonstrates that the concept of social justice is particularly relevant in Nigerian public consciousness during periods of radical social change caused by economic, political, and spiritual crises. Thirdly, there is a need to rethink the spiritual and value orientations of contemporary Nigerian society.

All of the above predetermined the choice of this philosopher and his concepts for study. In this sense, the diversity of factors stimulating the modern development of the rule of law and appeals to it, firstly, gives rise to various forms of the actual rule of law (Smith 2008; Sari 2020). Secondly, when combined with various social and ideological positions, it becomes the source of a diversity of approaches to the problem of the rule of law and interpretations of the concept itself. J. Rawls is one of the leading scholars in the field of justice. His theory of social justice is of great interest and has significant implications for the development and formation of modern society. He sought to demonstrate the importance of justice and how it must function not only as an ideal and theory, but also as a practical reality.

The Original Position and Veil of Ignorance

Rawls introduces a thought experiment he terms the ‘original position’—a hypothetical scenario where rational individuals come together to choose the principles that will govern their society. These individuals operate behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ that prevents them from knowing their specific place in society, class position, natural assets, intelligence, strength, conception of the good, or particular psychological tendencies (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 221). This veil ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged by natural contingencies or social circumstances, forcing participants to select principles impartially.

The original position generates principles that are fair to all because negotiators must consider every potential social position they might occupy. As Rawls notes, “In justice as fairness, the original position of equality corresponds to the state of nature in the traditional theory of the social contract” (Orji 2023, 65). This conceptual device offers a powerful tool for evaluating social arrangements by asking whether they would be agreed upon by free and equal persons unaware of their particular circumstances.

But most importantly, the meaning of Rawls’s hypothetical contract remains eminently utilitarian. Individuals enter into it in an effort to secure for themselves the greatest guaranteed quantity of primary goods, that is, to maximize their own utility (Plott 1978). One cannot help but notice the considerable haste with which Rawls assumed that individuals would proclaim precisely his two principles. If the rationality strategy were slightly modified, a choice could also be made in favor of utilitarian principles. The maximin strategy employed by Rawls, as follows from the latest

postulates of game theory, is by no means the only acceptable one. Consider a situation in which two people share the same set of natural goods, but one of these individuals is born into worse circumstances than the other (Teays 2025). This situation completely contradicts Rawls's own arguments, because unfair inequality persists. Turning to theory, Rawls argues that people born into different circumstances should have equal access to universal public goods. The theory does not address the question of people's pre-existing natural goods (Mathis and Shannon 2009).

The Two Principles of Justice

Rawls's theory, as discussed, takes on particular significance in contemporary Nigerian society, where social justice can serve as the value-based foundation for sustainable development. At the same time, issues of distribution of material goods and resources and the stability of civilization's development remain pressing and require solutions at both the national and international levels (Roberts-Cady 2025). Rawls's principles of justice acquire new meaning as one of the solutions to the current societal crisis. They can serve as the basis for social reform and consolidation in contemporary Nigerian society, and can also be used to address the challenges of sustainable development in modern society. From the original position, Rawls derives two fundamental principles of justice:

i. The Liberty Principle: "Each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties which is compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for all" (Okaneme 2020, 128). This principle prioritizes basic rights and freedoms—such as freedom of speech, assembly, property rights, and democratic participation—that must be equally distributed and protected.

ii. The Difference Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: a) "To the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society", b) "Attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity" (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 221).

These principles are lexically ordered, meaning the liberty principle must be satisfied before considering the difference principle. Rawls' framework thus prioritizes basic liberties while permitting inequalities only when they ultimately benefit the most disadvantaged groups in society.

The Concept of Distributive Justice

Central to Rawls' theory is the notion of distributive justice—how benefits and burdens should be allocated in society. Rawls argues that social primary goods—including rights, liberties, opportunities, income, wealth, and the social bases of self-respect—should be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution benefits the least advantaged (Orji 2025). This conception moves beyond mere material distribution to encompass broader social goods and opportunities.

Rawls later expanded his theory in "Political Liberalism" (1993) to address how justice can be achieved in societies characterized by pluralism—where citizens hold different and often conflicting religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines. He introduces the concept of overlapping consensus whereby people with different

comprehensive doctrines can agree on certain political conceptions of justice (Orji 2023, 84). This aspect holds particular relevance for Nigeria's religious and ethnic diversity.

Nigeria's Context: Historical and Contemporary Challenges to Social Justice

With this theory of justice, Rawls created a philosophical foundation for those committed to the redistribution of resources and the regulation of social and economic relations in modern societies with a market economic system. Rawls's theory of justice differs from other theories of justice primarily in that it offers a clear understanding of the structure of society itself, while also combining individual freedoms with a more careful and just distribution of material, social, and spiritual goods.

To understand the potential application of Rawlsian theory in Nigeria, one must first appreciate the historical context and contemporary realities that shape justice questions in the nation. Nigeria's social justice challenges have deep roots in its colonial history, post-independence political struggles, and ongoing governance failures.

Historical Foundations of Injustice

Nigeria's territorial boundaries were established through colonial demarcation that arbitrarily grouped together over 250 distinct ethnic groups with different languages, cultures, and traditional systems of governance. The British colonial administration implemented divide-and-rule policies that exacerbated ethnic differences and created hierarchical relationships among groups (Obienyem and Nweke 2025, 206). This colonial legacy established patterns of administrative inequality and institutionalized ethnic preferences that persisted after independence in 1960.

The post-independence period witnessed struggles over resource control and political representation, culminating in a devastating civil war (1967-1970) that further entrenched regional and ethnic divisions. Subsequent military rule (1966-1979 and 1983-1999) reinforced authoritarian governance and centralized control over natural resources, particularly oil revenues from the Niger Delta region (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 223). This centralization created a patronage system where access to political power translated directly to control over economic resources.

Contemporary Landscape of Inequality

Contemporary Nigeria presents a paradox of immense wealth alongside extreme poverty. Despite being Africa's largest oil producer and having the continent's largest GDP, Nigeria has one of the world's highest levels of income inequality. According to various reports, over 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, while a small elite controls a disproportionate share of national wealth (Obienyem and Nweke 2025, 206).

This economic inequality maps onto regional and ethnic disparities. The Niger Delta region, despite producing most of Nigeria's oil wealth, suffers from environmental degradation, underdevelopment, and poverty. Northern Nigeria experiences lower literacy rates and higher levels of deprivation compared to the

southern regions. These regional disparities fuel resentment and conflict, complicating efforts to build national cohesion (Obienyem and Nweke 2025, 208).

Institutional Challenges

Nigeria's institutional framework presents significant barriers to social justice. Corruption permeates all levels of government, diverting public resources from development priorities to private enrichment. The World Bank and other institutions have identified corruption as a major obstacle to Nigeria's development, with billions of dollars lost annually through graft, fraud, and embezzlement (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 224).

The judicial system struggles with inefficiency and partiality, undermining equal protection under the law. Law enforcement agencies often appear to serve the interests of powerful elites rather than providing impartial public service. These institutional weaknesses erode public trust and perpetuate cycles of injustice (Edogiawerie and Ekuase 2021, 51).

Ethno-Religious Dimensions

Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity presents both a potential strength and a source of conflict. The country is roughly divided between a predominantly Muslim north and mainly Christian south, with indigenous religious traditions also practiced across regions. Ethno-religious conflicts have erupted periodically, often fueled by political manipulation and economic competition (Obienyem and Nweke 2025, 208).

The intersection of ethnic and religious identities with political and economic inequality creates complex justice challenges. As Orji notes, "Politicians frequently manipulate these divisions to gain power, exacerbating instability" (Orji 2025). This manipulation of identity politics distracts from substantive policy issues and undermines the development of a shared national identity grounded in principles of citizenship rather than primordial affiliations.

The application of Rawls' theory to Nigeria's context requires careful translation of philosophical principles into practical governance arrangements. This section examines how Rawls' core concepts might address specific Nigerian justice questions.

The Original Position and Constitutional Design

Rawls' concept of the original position offers a powerful lens for evaluating Nigeria's constitutional framework. The Nigerian constitution establishes a federal system with significant power concentrated at the center—a structure that has been contested since independence. Viewing constitutional arrangements from behind a veil of ignorance—not knowing which region or ethnic group one would belong to—might lead to different distributions of power and resources (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 224).

A Rawlsian approach to constitutional design would prioritize arrangements that protect minority interests and ensure equitable representation. For instance, behind the veil of ignorance, negotiators might establish stronger mechanisms for revenue sharing to ensure that resource-producing regions receive adequate compensation while recognizing that resources belong to the nation as a whole. They might also institute

more robust power-sharing arrangements to prevent domination by any single ethnic or religious group (Okaneme 2020, 129).

The current concentration of power at the federal level, particularly control over natural resources, might be reconsidered from a Rawlsian perspective. As Yusuf and Shugaba argue, “Rawls’ ideas of equal basic liberties, fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle can be interpreted and potentially implemented in a nation characterized by significant socioeconomic disparities as well as ethno-religious diversity” (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 226).

The Liberty Principle and Fundamental Rights

The liberty principle emphasizes equal basic liberties for all citizens. In Nigeria’s context, this would require strengthening protections for democratic participation, freedom of expression, and religious practice. Despite constitutional guarantees, these rights are often compromised in practice (Okaneme 2020, 130). For example, freedom of expression is sometimes constrained by political pressures on media outlets, particularly when reporting on corruption or governance failures. Religious freedom is occasionally undermined by local restrictions on worship or sectarian violence. Democratic participation is compromised by electoral irregularities and violence.

A rigorous application of Rawls’ liberty principle would require addressing these implementation gaps through institutional reforms, independent judiciary, and civic education. It would also necessitate protecting the rights of minority groups who may be vulnerable to majoritarian pressures. As Obienyen and Nweke observe, “A secular framework, which separates religion from politics, is essential for ensuring justice and equal rights for all citizens” (Obienyem and Nweke 2025, 210) in a multi-religious society like Nigeria.

The Difference Principle and Economic Inequality

The difference principle has particular relevance for addressing Nigeria’s extreme economic inequalities. This principle would permit inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. Nigeria’s current economic arrangements—where a small elite captures most wealth while nearly half the population lives in poverty—would fail this test dramatically.

Applying the difference principle would require restructuring economic policies to prioritize poverty reduction and human development. This might include:

- Progressive taxation where wealthier individuals and corporations contribute proportionally more to public services;
- Targeted social programs to provide health care, education, and social safety nets for the most vulnerable;
- Regulatory measures to prevent monopolistic practices and ensure fair competition;
- Wage policies that reduce the gap between highest and lowest earners, particularly in public sector;
- Investment priorities focused on basic infrastructure and services in underserved regions (John 2014).

Resource allocation would be particularly important from a Rawlsian perspective. Nigeria's oil wealth presents both an opportunity and a challenge for applying the difference principle. Currently, resource distribution is often skewed toward politically connected regions and individuals. A Rawlsian approach would direct resources toward programmes and initiatives that benefit the most disadvantaged communities, such as those in the Niger Delta region that have experienced environmental degradation from oil extraction.

Fair Equality of Opportunity and Nigerian Society

Rawls' requirement of fair equality of opportunity goes beyond formal equality to address substantive barriers to advancement. In Nigeria, factors such as regional underdevelopment, unequal educational access, and discrimination based on ethnicity or religion create significant obstacles to fair competition (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 226).

Applying this principle would require proactive measures to level the playing field, such as:

- Investing in education quality across all regions, particularly in disadvantaged areas;
- Implementing merit-based recruitment and promotion in public sector employment;
- Creating programs to support entrepreneurship and economic participation among marginalized groups;
- Addressing historical injustices through targeted development programmes;
- Ensuring that all Nigerians have access to basic infrastructure necessary for participation in social and economic life (Okaneme 2020, 130).

The Nigerian federal character principle - which requires equitable representation of different states in government appointments - represents an existing attempt to address regional imbalances. However, this approach has sometimes been criticized for prioritizing regional representation over merit. A Rawlsian perspective might support the goals of the federal character principle while seeking to implement it in ways that do not compromise institutional competence.

Challenges and Limitations of Applying Rawlsian Theory in Nigeria

While Rawls' theory offers valuable insights for addressing Nigeria's justice challenges, its application faces significant theoretical and practical limitations. These challenges must be honestly assessed to develop a realistic approach to social justice reform.

Cultural and Contextual Limitations

Rawls developed his theory primarily within the Western philosophical tradition, raising questions about its cross-cultural applicability. Some African philosophers have questioned whether Rawls' individualism adequately accounts for communitarian values that emphasize community and interdependence (John 2014). The concept of

personhood in many Nigerian cultures often emphasizes relational identity rather than the autonomous individual presupposed in much liberal theory.

Additionally, Rawls' focus on distributive justice may not fully capture the range of justice issues relevant to Nigeria, including recognition justice (addressing cultural disrespect and stigma) and restorative justice (addressing historical wrongs). The legacy of colonialism and historical injustices creates unique challenges that Rawls' framework may not adequately address (John 2014).

Institutional and Governance Challenges

Implementing Rawlsian principles requires effective institutions capable of impartially administering justice and redistributing resources. Nigeria's institutional weaknesses—including corruption, limited administrative capacity, and political interference—present significant obstacles to implementing any comprehensive theory of justice.

The patronage system characteristic of Nigerian politics directly contradicts Rawlsian principles. Political loyalty is often based on ethnic or religious affiliation rather than a general commitment to justice. State resources are often distributed based on patronage rather than principles of justice. In this sense, strengthening democratic achievements requires addressing a number of problems, such as corruption, resource scarcity, and social barriers.

Pluralism and the Overlapping Consensus

Nigeria's profound diversity tests Rawls' concept of overlapping consensus—the idea that people with different comprehensive doctrines can agree on political conceptions of justice. Deep divisions between religious and ethnic groups sometimes extend to fundamentally different visions of the good society (Obienyem and Nweke 2025, 210). For instance, debates over the role of religious law in secular legal systems reflect different conceptions of justice that may be difficult to reconcile through overlapping consensus. In northern Nigeria, some Muslim communities have advocated for implementation of Sharia law, while secularists and Christians have resisted these efforts (Obienyem and Nweke 2025, 210). Building a shared conception of justice across these divides remains challenging.

Resource Constraints and Prioritization

Rawls' theory assumes a level of economic development that enables redistribution without sacrificing basic infrastructure. Nigeria's development challenges—including limited resources for health, education, and infrastructure—create difficult trade-offs between immediate needs and long-term investments in justice (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 226).

The difference principle requires prioritizing the least advantaged, but in a context of extreme scarcity, determining what constitutes 'greatest benefit' to the most vulnerable involves complex calculations. Limited administrative capacity also constrains the ability to implement targeted programs effectively (John 2014).

Pathways Toward Rawlsian Justice in Nigeria: Policy Implications and Recommendations

Despite these challenges, Rawls' theory provides valuable guidance for advancing social justice in Nigeria. This section outlines practical policy implications and recommendations derived from a Rawlsian framework.

Institutional Reforms for Fairness

Implementing Rawlsian justice requires creating institutions that impartially apply rules and distribute resources. Key institutional reforms might include:

- **Judicial independence:** Strengthening the autonomy, funding, and professionalism of the judiciary to ensure equal justice under law;
- **Anti-corruption measures:** Enhancing the capacity and independence of anti-corruption agencies, protecting whistleblowers, and promoting transparency in public contracting;
- **Electoral reform:** Ensuring free and fair elections through independent electoral administration, transparent processes, and enforcement of electoral laws;
- **Security sector reform:** Developing professional security forces that protect all citizens equally regardless of ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation (Obienyem and Nweke 2025, 210; Okaneme 2020, 130; Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 226).

These institutional changes would help create what Rawls called the 'basic structure' of society—the fundamental institutions that distribute rights, opportunities, and resources.

Education Policy for Equal Opportunity

Rawls attaches significant importance to the right to education and the establishment of principles of just distribution. He considers the first such principle to be the requirement that every person equally possess basic rights and freedoms. The system of individual rights and freedoms must coincide with universal freedom, and freedom must be maximized; its restriction can only be justified for the sake of its better protection: freedom can be limited only for the sake of freedom. The second principle is the requirement of equality as the equal possession of freedom and the equal distribution of goods (exceptions to this rule are permissible here only for the purpose of leveling out existing inequalities). This principle is concretized as the principle of equal opportunity, aimed at the maximum elimination of inequalities arising or established on the basis of wealth or birth. Every person must have equal opportunities in striving to achieve a certain status in society. Therefore, Rawls characterizes justice as correctness, good faith, impartiality, as a kind of procedural fairness, which is ensured through legal norms consistent with the principle of the rule of just law. The role of the constitution is crucial here, defining the fundamental distributive procedures that are most likely to lead to the creation of a just and stable order. This role of the constitution is supported and strengthened by laws.

Education plays a crucial role in creating fair equality of opportunity. A Rawlsian approach to education policy would include:

- **Equitable funding:** Ensuring that educational resources are distributed to reduce rather than reinforce existing disparities,
- **Curriculum reform:** Developing curricula that promote civic values of equality, tolerance, and respect for diversity,
- **Access initiatives:** Creating programs to support educational access for girls, children from poor families, and those in rural areas,
- **Critical thinking:** Emphasizing philosophical education that enables citizens to engage with questions of justice and fairness (Yusuf and Shugaba 2024, 226).

These provisions justify the need to make efforts to address economic inequality, improve access to education and health care, promote gender equality and ensure fair treatment of different ethnic and religious groups.

Economic Restructuring for Shared Prosperity

In recent decades, the concept of the relationship between legality and justice has undergone a serious rethinking: an attempt has been made to reconcile the moral and legal values of individualism and the principle of equality, personal autonomy and issues of income redistribution.

In the history of state and law, the moral concept of justice has primarily influenced those laws and legal norms aimed at protecting basic individual rights and freedoms, ensuring equality before the law, the right to vote and run for office, the right to a fair trial, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and so on. It is in these laws and legal norms that the moral concept of justice becomes a real fact of law, i.e., is realized in law. At the same time, fundamental ethical principles (justice and injustice) and law mutually influence each other as regulators of behavior in society. Compliance with established legal norms is more successful in society, the stronger the conviction of all (or the majority) members of society in the justice of the prevailing principles of legality and the rule of law. Applying the difference principle would require significant economic restructuring to ensure that inequalities benefit the least advantaged. Key economic policies might include:

- **Progressive taxation:** Implementing tax policies where higher earners contribute proportionally more to public services,
- **Social protection:** Establishing comprehensive social safety nets, including health insurance, unemployment benefits, and pensions for informal workers,
- **Labor regulations:** Ensuring living wages, safe working conditions, and rights to organize for all workers,
- **Resource governance:** Reforming management of natural resources to ensure transparent and equitable distribution of benefits.

Constitutional and Political Reforms

The modern constitutional regime in Nigeria, as a political, legal, economic, and moral system, is built on universal principles and techniques of state and legal development, embodying centuries of accumulated experience, which has been explored in Western European and Nigerian political and legal scholarship. The result is an understanding

of law as a social institution embodying a number of essential principles, the most important of which are freedom, legality, and justice.

An analysis of historically developed and current Western theories that combine social justice with the principles of the rule of law and civil society is of considerable scientific and practical interest. The advancement of new conceptual ideas in the area of building a rule of law and shaping civil society institutions compels us to turn to history and past experience. Many ideas about law, morality, justice, and legality that preoccupied ancient thinkers, modern legal philosophers, and our own legal scholars must be updated and examined in their substantive form.

Nigeria's constitutional framework may require revision to better reflect Rawlsian principles. Potential reforms include:

- Power redistribution: Reconsidering the federal structure to allocate powers and resources more equitably between different levels of government;
- Bill of Rights expansion: Strengthening constitutional protections for social and economic rights alongside civil and political rights;
- Subsidiarity principle: Decentralizing governance to allow communities greater control over matters that affect them directly;
- Truth and reconciliation processes: Addressing historical injustices through official recognition and reparative measures.

Civic Education and Public Reason

John Rawls's theory of justice provides a powerful moral framework for addressing Nigeria's long-standing problems, such as inequality, corruption, and disunity. Although developed in a different context, Rawls's concepts of the original position, the veil of ignorance, and the two principles of justice offer valuable insights for rethinking the social contract in Nigeria.

Applying Rawls's theory to Nigeria requires both philosophical adaptation and practical implementation strategies. The liberty principle emphasizes the importance of protecting fundamental rights and democratic participation for all Nigerians, regardless of ethnicity or religion. The difference principle provides a moral guide for economic policy, directing resources to benefit the least advantaged members of society. However, implementing Rawls's theory of justice in Nigeria faces significant challenges, including cultural differences, institutional shortcomings, and resource constraints. Overcoming these obstacles requires contextualizing Rawls's ideas within the unique context of Nigeria while preserving their core ethical principles. This analysis suggests that a Rawlsian approach to Nigerian justice would prioritize institutional reforms that ensure impartiality and fairness, educational policies that create genuinely equal opportunity, economic mechanisms that promote the distribution of prosperity, and political reforms that more fairly distribute power. It would also emphasize the importance of civic education and public reason in building consensus among Nigeria's diverse communities.

Ultimately, following Rawls's principles of justice in Nigeria does not mean importing foreign philosophical concepts, but rather engaging in the creative process of adapting universal principles of justice to specific historical and cultural contexts. While the pursuit of social justice in Nigeria is vital to creating a just and equitable

society where all people have the opportunity to thrive, efforts must be made to address economic inequality, improve access to education and healthcare, promote gender equality, and ensure the fair treatment of various ethnic and religious groups.

The pursuit of social justice in Nigeria remains a pressing and necessary task. By engaging with philosophical concepts like those of Rawls, Nigerians can continue to develop their own approaches to justice, drawing on both universal principles and local wisdom. Despite the challenges, the pursuit of a more just society, where no one feels left behind, abandoned, marginalized, or disadvantaged in the distribution of resources, represents a worthy goal for the country's future.

Rawls emphasized the importance of public reason—the use of arguments that all citizens can reasonably be expected to support—in democratic deliberation. Developing public reason in Nigeria will require the following:

- Civic education, which involves incorporating philosophical education about democracy, justice, and citizenship into school and adult education curricula;
- Media literacy, which involves supporting media outlets that promote reasoned dialogue that embraces differences rather than sensationalism or division;
- Intergroup dialogue, which involves creating structured opportunities for exchange between different ethnic and religious communities;
- Leadership development, which involves cultivating a new generation of leaders committed to justice rather than patronage.

As Orji suggests, drawing insights from other divided societies like Rwanda's post-genocide reconciliation might offer valuable lessons for Nigeria (Orji 2025).

Conclusion and discussion

Rawls's philosophical views are considered liberal, as many ideas characteristic of classical liberalism (the idea of natural rights, liberty, equality of opportunity, rationality, and the existence of private property) occupy a central place in the political life of modern Nigeria. The principles of justice he proposed have largely become the foundation of modern constitutional democracy. However, Rawls cannot be classified as a classical liberal, as his theory addresses the problem of distribution, reflected in the second principle of justice, from a perspective close to social democratic thought.

Rawls's theory of justice is a rational model of social equality of fair opportunity, and thus the social contract is viewed in this theory as a model of rational collective choice in Nigerian society. According to Rawls, all social values, freedom and opportunity, income, and wealth should be equally distributed, except in cases where the unequal distribution of any or all values would favor everyone. The exchange between the two principles of justice (the principle of liberties and the principle of differences) is prohibited, since fundamental freedoms—political freedom, freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, and individual freedom—cannot be exchanged for economic well-being. Rawls's principle of differentiation can be used as a system of measures to relieve social tensions and reduce socioeconomic polarization in contemporary Nigeria.

Rawls's principles of justice are universal not only for American-style democracies but for any democratic society. Contemporary Nigerian society, as a civil and just

society, must be defined by a set of institutions that guarantee fundamental human rights.

This theory can be seen as an attempt to affirm liberal values, emphasizing the value of pluralism as the basis for sustainable and stable societal development. The presence of a plurality of moral, religious, and philosophical ideas, resulting in a multitude of conflicting and often incompatible concepts of meaning, values, and goals in life, is a typical feature of the political culture of modern democratic societies. The challenge of policy in such a society is to find a solution to the problem of ensuring the stability of modern democracy.

Rawls's principles of justice, within the framework of sustainable development, acquire new meaning as one way out of the current crisis of Nigerian society.

The theoretical significance of this article lies in the fact that Rawls's theory, as discussed, acquires particular relevance in contemporary Nigerian society, where social justice is the value foundation of sustainable development. The content and conclusions obtained during the study are aimed at a deeper understanding of the principles of justice as a basis for the sustainable socio-economic, political, and spiritual development of modern society, as well as in modeling the future development of society. Using a political and philosophical analysis of social justice as a core concept in Rawls's theory, its interconnection and interdependence with freedom, equality, and the injustices of political transformations in Nigerian society are established. This study attempts to define the significance of Rawls's principles of justice as a value-based foundation for reforming democratic Nigerian society, which will allow for a more detailed exploration of the concept of justice using Rawls's theory as an example. In this sense, the practical significance of this work lies in the fact that Rawls's principles of justice, as a social practice, can serve as the basis for social reform and consolidation of contemporary Nigerian democratic society.

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Ethics Statement

The authors affirm that this research was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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