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Understanding how the Nigerian Government Works

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Introduction

Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa," boasts a rich tapestry of cultures, peoples, and histories. Central to the functioning of this diverse nation is its government system, which is both vast in scope and intricate in design. Understanding how the Nigerian government works is essential not only for students and professionals in political science, law, and public administration, but also for every Nigerian citizen seeking to engage with the mechanisms that shape their daily lives. This book, "Understanding how the Nigerian Government Works: A Guide to the Nigerian Government System," offers a comprehensive exploration of the structure, principles, and functioning of government at all tiers, from the national to the grassroots level.

The roots of Nigerian governance can be traced to a federal republic structure that balances the authority of a central government with the rights and responsibilities of 36 states and a singular Federal Capital Territory. Overlaid upon this federal system is a framework inspired in part by the United States Constitution—the separation of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary—which seeks to foster accountability and prevent tyranny through checks and balances. Yet, within this structure, there are uniquely Nigerian dynamics evolved in response to the country's history, culture, and socio-political realities, making the system both familiar in outline and distinctive in practice.

At the heart of Nigeria's modern political system lies the 1999 Constitution, a document that sets forth the fundamental legal bedrock and guidance for governance. This constitution not only delineates the powers of the federal, state, and local governments, but also guarantees various fundamental rights for Nigerian citizens. However, translating constitutional ideals into reality has not always been seamless. Nigeria's journey has been marked by challenges related to balancing power among its different tiers, navigating intergovernmental relationships, and delivering effective service to its vast population.

To truly comprehend the Nigerian government, one must appreciate the organizational complexities that span from the highest offices in Abuja to rural local government councils. The federal government handles affairs of national importance, such as defense and foreign policy, while states legislate and administer in areas closer to citizens' everyday lives, including education and healthcare. Beneath these, the local governments—the administrative face that most Nigerians interact with daily—shoulder responsibilities for primary healthcare, basic education, and local infrastructure.

This book takes readers on a detailed journey through the architecture of Nigeria's government, starting from its historical roots and moving through the workings of its key institutions. We examine the roles of elected officials, the process of lawmaking, the interdependence of branches, the role of the judiciary, and the importance of political parties and elections. We also confront the perennial challenges—the debates over revenue allocation, issues of federal dominance, the quest for effective checks on power, and the evolving demands for reform.

By the end of this book, readers will gain not only a clear understanding of how Nigeria is governed, but also a sense of the living, evolving system that continues to adapt to the hopes, needs, and aspirations of its people. Knowledge of the Nigerian government is not merely academic—it is the key to informed citizenship and effective participation in the nation's democratic life.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Foundations of the Nigerian Government System

Nigeria, a nation of immense diversity and dynamic energy, operates under a governmental structure that is both complex and fascinating. At its heart, Nigeria is organized as a federal republic, a system of governance where power is divided between a central government and constituent political units, in this case, states. This foundational principle acknowledges the vastness and heterogeneity of the country, aiming to provide a framework that can accommodate the distinct identities and needs of its many ethnic groups and regions while maintaining national unity.

The decision to adopt a federal system was not a mere administrative choice; it was a political imperative born from Nigeria's history and its composition. With hundreds of distinct languages and cultures spread across a large geographical area, a unitary system, where all power resides with the central government, would likely prove unwieldy and potentially oppressive. Federalism, therefore, serves as a compromise, allowing states a degree of autonomy while reserving key national responsibilities for the federal level.

Central to this federal arrangement is the concept of a three-tier structure. Imagine a layered cake, if you will, but instead of sponge and cream, the layers are governmental authority. At the very top sits the Federal Government, based in the capital, Abuja. This is the layer responsible for the big picture - things like national defense, foreign policy, and printing money. Beneath the federal layer are the State Governments, each with its own capital city and administrative apparatus, managing affairs specific to their respective states.

The state layer is crucial because it brings governance closer to the people than the federal level can manage alone. States have significant responsibilities in areas like education, healthcare, and infrastructure within their borders. They act as a vital link, translating national policies into state-specific actions and addressing local concerns that might be overlooked from distant Abuja. There are currently thirty-six states in Nigeria, each a significant political entity in its own right.

And then, at the very base of this governmental cake, is the Local Government tier. This is the closest government is likely to get to the average citizen, responsible for providing essential services right in their communities. Think primary healthcare centres, local roads, basic education facilities, and waste management. Nigeria is divided into 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs), plus additional area councils in the Federal Capital Territory, making this the most numerous and arguably the most

visible level of government for many Nigerians on a day-to-day basis.

This three-tiered structure is not just a loose arrangement; it is firmly anchored by the supreme law of the land: the Constitution. In Nigeria's case, the operative constitution currently is the one adopted in 1999. The Constitution acts as the ultimate rulebook, defining the powers and responsibilities of each tier of government, outlining how they interact, and establishing the fundamental rights and duties of citizens. Any law or action taken by any level of government that contradicts the Constitution is deemed invalid.

Beyond the federal structure and the hierarchical tiers, another foundational principle of the Nigerian government system is the separation of powers. This concept, borrowed heavily from systems like that of the United States, dictates that the core functions of government – making laws, executing laws, and interpreting laws – should be vested in distinct and independent branches. This prevents a single individual or group from accumulating too much power, a safeguard against authoritarianism.

These three distinct branches are the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary. The Executive branch is responsible for implementing and enforcing the laws made by the legislature. At the federal level, this is headed by the President. The Legislative branch is tasked with making laws; at the federal level, this is the National Assembly. The Judicial branch interprets the laws and administers justice, with the Supreme Court at the pinnacle of the hierarchy.

While the branches are separate, they are not entirely isolated. The system incorporates a mechanism known as 'checks and balances'. This means each branch has certain powers that allow it to limit or oversee the actions of the other branches. For example, the legislature can scrutinize the executive's actions and approve or reject appointments, while the judiciary can review laws passed by the legislature or actions taken by the executive to ensure they comply with the constitution.

This intricate dance of powers and responsibilities is designed to ensure accountability and prevent the abuse of authority. It means that the President cannot simply make laws, nor can the legislature unilaterally enforce them, nor can the judiciary operate outside the bounds of the legal framework. Each branch serves as a check on the potential excesses of the others, theoretically leading to more balanced and responsible governance.

The federal government, positioned at the apex, holds sway over matters deemed crucial to the nation's sovereignty and collective well-being. Its exclusive domain includes areas like national security, currency, immigration, and international relations. The resources and authority wielded by the federal level are substantial, reflecting its role as the unifying force and ultimate guarantor of the nation's integrity.

However, the existence of state and local governments means that power is not solely concentrated in Abuja. States have significant autonomy in areas not explicitly listed as exclusive to the federal government. They can legislate on matters like land use, aspects of education and healthcare, and local infrastructure. This allows policies and programs to be tailored to the specific needs and contexts of different states, reflecting the diverse nature of the country.

The local government tier, while often facing significant challenges in terms of funding and capacity, is constitutionally recognized and intended to be the engine of grassroots development and service delivery. Its proximity to the populace makes it ideally positioned to understand and address the immediate needs of communities, from maintaining local roads to providing basic sanitation services.

Nigeria's legal system, which the judicial branch interprets and applies, adds another layer to the foundational structure. It's not a single, monolithic system but rather a blend of influences. It incorporates statutory law, which comprises written laws enacted by the legislature, heavily influenced by English law from the colonial era. English common law, based on judicial precedents, also forms a significant part of the system.

Alongside these, Nigeria recognizes customary law, which derives from the traditional laws and practices of various ethnic groups. This allows for the application of indigenous legal norms, particularly in matters of personal law such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, provided they are not repugnant to natural justice, equity, and good conscience, or incompatible with existing legislation.

In certain northern states, Islamic law, or sharia, is also applied, primarily to Muslims, particularly in civil matters. While its application in criminal cases has been a subject of debate and controversy, the constitution permits its use within certain limits and jurisdictions, adding another dimension to the diverse legal landscape.

Understanding these foundational elements – the federal republic status, the three-tier structure, the supremacy of the constitution, the separation of powers, and the blend of legal systems – is the essential starting point for comprehending how the Nigerian government operates. These principles define the basic architecture upon which the entire system is built, setting the stage for the complex interactions, institutions, and processes that will be explored in detail in the following chapters. They represent the fundamental blueprint for governance in a nation navigating the complexities of unity in diversity.

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