



## Political Patronage and Interference in Recruitment into the Nigerian Public Bureaucracy: Fixing the Capacity Gap

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**Abstract.** Political patronage and systemic interference have long undermined merit-based recruitment in the Nigerian public bureaucracy, creating a capacity crisis that compromises service delivery and institutional effectiveness. This paper examines the mechanisms by which political patronage and interference distort public service recruitment, assesses the institutional damage inflicted, and proposes actionable reforms to restore capacity and legitimacy. Within the framework of neopatrimonialism and institutional theories, the paper adopts a qualitative approach, relying on secondary data sources which include recent scholarly studies on political patronage and policy implementation. The study reveals that patronage-driven recruitment, which manifests as ethnic monopolies in federal agencies, job racketeering, slot allocation, and a systematic disregard for merit and the federal character principle, has produced a public workforce characterized by skills deficits, low productivity, and diminishing public trust. The paper concludes that meritocracy and the federal character principle must be reconciled through transparency, data-driven processes that restore both institutional performance and the moral contract between the Nigerian state and the citizens. The suggested policy recommendations include: the establishment of a Federal Character Compliance Dashboard that publicly presents annual recruitment data for each MDA, disaggregated by state of origin, gender, qualification tier, and position type. A joint task force of the FCC and ICPC empowered to halt or invalidate recruitment exercises that fail minimum compliance thresholds; the strengthening of the whistleblower legal and security framework to ensure that insiders willing to expose patronage networks are protected, among others.

**Keywords:** Recruitment, Interference, Political patronage, Capacity gap, Federal character, Meritocracy.

### 1. Introduction

The Nigerian public service, once regarded as one of the most professional civil services in the post-colonial era in Africa, has experienced a prolonged decline in institutional capacity. Among the most significant drivers of this deterioration is the capture of recruitment processes by political patronage networks, where loyalty, ethnic affiliation, and personal connections supersede competence and qualification as criteria for public service employment. Rather than prioritizing competence and merit-based recruitment, processes are frequently shaped by favoritism, godfatherism, and ethnic bargaining (Atoyebi, 2025). The practice wherein hiring decisions are determined by political connections, religious loyalties, financial inducement, or ethnic alliances rather than applicant qualifications has produced what scholars term 'disguised unemployment' within ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), thus eroding institutional capacity and public trust. This phenomenon has produced a capacity gap, which is reflected in a systematic shortfall between the human resource requirements of public institutions and the actual competencies of their personnel (Cyprian, 2026; Yohanna-Mari & Kiden-Tanimu, 2026).

The recruitment process into the Nigerian public bureaucracy carries a uniquely Nigerian complexity that extends far beyond standard human resource management elucidations. Unlike the relatively straightforward recruitment models found in many Western bureaucracies, Nigeria's public service recruitment exists at the intersection of constitutional imperative for national representation, administrative

ideal of professional competence and the lived reality of systematic corruption and political patronage (Njoku & Gulu, 2025). Recruitment in the service is required to simultaneously satisfy the federal character principle of equitable geo-ethnic representation and the bureaucratic requirement for merit-based competence. These mandates are frequently contradictory, creating what Cyprian (2026) described as a fundamental tension between political representation and administrative efficiency, resulting in efficiency deficit, political interference, politicization of bureaucratic gatekeeping, and capacity gaps.

The consequences of patronage-driven recruitment extend far beyond individual agencies. It manifests through several mechanisms historically documented across federal agencies. “Slot-sharing schemes” where recruitment quotas are distributed among governors, senators, ministers, and high-ranking politicians who places preferred candidates in jobs and positions regardless of merit or qualifications (Atoyebi, 2025). When unqualified appointees occupy positions requiring specialized expertise, it results in decreased organizational efficiency, poor service delivery, weakened policy implementation, public funds being misappropriated, and citizen trust in governance erodes. Despite the introduction of the federal character principle and the civil service rules designed to ensure fairness in recruitment processes, the mechanisms are often manipulated for political gains (Adebayo & Salau, 2024). The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) has documented cases where federal agencies effectively excluded qualified candidates from entire geopolitical zones, with one agency offering 189 of 190 positions to candidates from the agency head's home region (Businessday NG, 2025). Such practices not only violate constitutional provisions mandating equitable representation but also perpetuate a cycle of underperformance that hampers Nigeria's development trajectory.

According to the World Bank (2023), governance challenges in Nigeria, including politicized recruitment, significantly hinder public sector performance. This paper seeks to examine the primary mechanisms through which political patronage and interference distort public service recruitment in Nigeria; assess the institutional damages and capacity gaps inflicted by the infiltration of political patronage in the recruitment process; and propose actionable reforms that could be introduced to restore capacity and legitimacy of the public bureaucracy. In order to achieve the stated objectives, this paper is divided into five sections. The first section is the introduction,

which gives a preview of the study and the conceptualization of key terms adopted in the study. The second section examines the theoretical framework of the study, which is situated within the Neopatrimonialism and Institutional theories. The third section is a review of the mechanisms through which political patronage has framed recruitment into the Nigerian public bureaucracy, and an analysis of the institutional damage and capacity gaps that patronage-based recruitment has inflicted on the service. Section four examines the reform initiatives at the federal and state levels to mitigate the dynamics of patronage-based recruitment and the barriers that impede their implementations. The fifth section contains the conclusion and suggested policy recommendations.

## 2. Conceptual Clarification

### 2.1 Political Patronage

Political patronage refers to the practice whereby public appointments, contracts, and other state resources are allocated based on political allegiance, personal connections, or ethnic affiliation rather than objective criteria of competence or merit (Yohanna Mari & Kiden Tanimu, 2026). In many developing countries, particularly in Nigeria, patronage involves the allocation of public positions based on loyalty, personal relationships, or political support rather than merit, qualifications, and open competition. Patronage serves as a mechanism for political elites to secure devotion, maintain coalition stability, and distribute state resources to supportive constituencies. It is closely linked to clientelism and godfather politics, and it fundamentally subverts the Weberian ideal of a professional bureaucracy operating according to rational-legal principles (Perry & Vandenebee, 2022).

Yohanna Mari and Kiden Tanimu (2026) argue that patronage in the Nigerian context operates through multiple channels, such as direct political appointments to leadership positions, informal pressure on civil service commissions to favor certain candidates, and the creation of parallel recruitment processes that bypass established procedures. These practices are not merely deviations from formal rules but constitute an alternative governance logic in which public employment functions as a reward for political service rather than a mechanism for service delivery.

### 2.2 Recruitment

Traditionally, the concept of recruitment is described as a process of generating a pool of qualified applicants for an organizational job. Recruitment in

the public service is the strategic, rule-bound process of attracting, identifying, and selecting individuals who possess not only the required competences but also the representativeness and public service ethos necessary to achieve democratic accountability and administrative effectiveness (Breugh, 2017 & Kennedy, 2022). Recruitment is a technical process to identify individuals with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to execute public policy effectively. This process aligns with the classic merit principle, codified in civil service systems worldwide to prevent patronage (OECD, 2021). Recruitment serves as the primary tool for achieving a bureaucracy that demographically mirrors the population it serves. Recruitment in the Nigerian public bureaucracy is the structured process through which government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) identify, attract, and select individuals to fill vacant positions, ensuring the continuity and effectiveness of state administration.

### 2.3 Federal Character Principle

The Federal Character Principle, enshrined in Section 14(3) and 14(4) of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, and operationalized by the Federal Character Commission (FCC) was designed to ensure that public service representation reflects the country's ethnic and regional diversity, thereby promoting national unity and mitigating fears of domination. According to Amanze & Gulu (2025), the compelling impetus for the policy was to reflect the country's diversity in the employment distribution in public sector organizations and, consequently, provide individuals from different geopolitical groups with a sense of belonging that transcends ethnic, regional, and religious boundaries. The operationalization of the federal character principle occurs through several mechanisms, such as the Federal Character Commission, established by Act No. 34 of 1996, charged with monitoring compliance and issuing guidelines for equitable representation (Osemeka, 2016). In practice, this requires federal ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) to ensure that their workforce composition reflects the demographic distribution of Nigeria's 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory.

Recruitment processes theoretically incorporate quotas, with each state allocated representation targets. The principle applies across virtually all public concerns, including the civil service, the armed forces, education, government appointments, and party politics (Covenant University, 2024, p. 2). However, enforcement remains problematic as the principle's implementation has been described as suffering from

profound institutional deficits in governmental accountability (Suberu, 2022, p. 4). While the federal character principle was intended to prevent the dominance of any single group and promote national integration, the principle has been co-opted by patronage networks seeking to justify ethnically biased recruitment (Businessday NG, 2025). The result is a persistent tension between equity considerations, which refer to ensuring representation for marginalized groups, and meritocratic criteria. The Senate's 2025 investigation into federal character compliance revealed that many agencies have weaponized the principle to exclude qualified candidates from non-preferred states while claiming adherence to diversity mandates (The Eagle Online, 2025).

The federal character principle is widely viewed as undermining meritocracy in public sector recruitment and contradicts the public personnel management practice of emphasizing merit in the hiring process, leading to ineffective and inefficient service delivery. The principle has been captured by political elites, serving their interests rather than those of genuinely marginalized communities. In a 2025 inaugural lecture, Professor Musa Dalhatu argued that the federal character principle has been turned into a vehicle for elites' interests preservation, rather than a solution to historical injustices or structural inequalities (Federal University of Lafia, 2025). He noted further that, unlike affirmative action policies in other democracies, which are targeted at vulnerable populations and time-bound, the Nigerian model is indefinite and tilted in favour of the elite (Federal University of Lafia, 2025). Recent scholarship demonstrates that the federal character principle has been systematically utilized as an instrument for patronage infiltration (Ediba, Nebo-Okpala, & Remilekun, 2026). It has been operationalized as a system of 'slot allocation' where political elites claim to nominate candidates from their constituencies regardless of qualifications. This transforms ethnic and regional identity into a patronage resource as political godfathers present themselves as gatekeepers to public sector employment for their communities (Suberu, 2022).

### 2.4 Capacity Gap

Capacity gaps in the public service are better described as multi-dimensional mismatches between institutional demands and the actual ability to deliver public values. There are manifold deficits in human, structural, adaptive, and political breaches that prevent public organizations from achieving their mandated outcomes (OECD, 2023). Capacity gaps encompass

not only individual applicant deficits but also structural weaknesses in how the public service attracts, assesses, and selects talent. When political loyalty overrides competence, unqualified individuals find their way into the public service, thereby lowering baseline capacity. Capacity gaps emerge when administrative processes such as approval chains, financial transactions, case management, and citizen intake begin to experience bottlenecks like delays and process architecture challenges (Meijer & Thaens, 2021). An administrative operational capacity gap manifests as long queues, lost files, delayed payments, frustrated staff, and angry citizens.

The persistent challenge of capacity deficits within Nigeria's public bureaucracy represents one of the most significant obstacles to effective governance and national development. Capacity gaps are described as the divergence between the competencies, skills, and institutional capabilities required for efficient public service delivery and the actual attributes possessed by personnel and systems (Ayodele & Ogunyemi, 2025). These gaps are not primarily attributable to resource constraints or inadequate training systems; rather, they stem from a deeply entrenched recruitment paradigm in which political patronage, ethnic considerations, and personal loyalty systematically override merit-based selection (Olaopa, 2024). Closing the gaps requires moving beyond blame and toward honest diagnosis of processes, technology, skills, coordination, and rules. According to the World Bank (2024), operational capacity is the silent heartbeat of the state; when it falters, all policy ambitions falter with it.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The study of political patronage in recruitment into the Nigerian public bureaucracy requires a multi-theoretical approach that captures the complex interplay between formal institutional rules and informal power dynamics. Nigeria presents a peculiar case where codified civil service regulations coexist with deeply embedded practices of clientelism, ethnic balancing, and loyalty-based appointments. This paper integrates two complementary theoretical perspectives, which are the Neopatrimonialism theory and the Institutional theory. Neopatrimonialism theory by Eisenstadt (1973) was conceptualized as a hybrid political system combining legal-rational bureaucracy with patrimonial practices. Public offices and state resources are treated as private property of the officeholder rather than as public trust. Social and political relations are structured around vertical chains of personal loyalty, where patrons distribute resources (including jobs) in exchange for political support,

while written constitutions, civil service rules, and legal procedures exist on paper but are routinely bypassed in favor of informal, personal arrangements.

Political leaders maintain control by exercising unconstrained discretion over appointments, promotions, and resource allocation. Recruitment and advancement depend primarily on personal loyalty to a patron rather than on merit, qualifications, or performance. Patronage networks perpetuate themselves because beneficiaries repay patrons through political loyalty, electoral support, and sometimes kickbacks. Neopatrimonialism explains why recruitment into the Nigerian public service often deviates from established merit-based procedures. Ediba, Nebo-Okpala, and Remilekun (2026) demonstrate that neopatrimonial norms are deeply embedded in Nigeria's political, historical, and institutional structures, operating through elite networks, ethnic balancing, and political incentives that subvert formal rules. The federal character principle, despite its egalitarian intentions, has been exploited to prioritize political loyalty and ethnic considerations over competence, becoming a vehicle for patronage distribution rather than a tool for equitable representation (Suberu, 2022).

Institutional theory by DiMaggio & Powell (1983) emphasizes that institutions are not just made of rules but are also made of norms, routines, and cultural-cognitive elements. It stressed how formal rules, informal norms, and cognitive-cultural elements shape organizational behavior. The theory's distinction between formal institutions (codified laws, regulations, procedures) and informal institutions (traditions, networks, unwritten rules) is particularly valuable for analyzing Nigeria's public service recruitment landscape. A central insight from institutional theory is that informal institutions often override formal ones in contexts where enforcement mechanisms are weak. Ikpebe, Akinrinmade & Asempah (2025) describes this as the disjunction between "formal, documented rules that govern the Nigerian system of public administration and the informal practices that actually determine outcomes".

While Nigerian civil service regulations formally mandate competitive examinations and merit-based selection, lived reality is frequently shaped by patronage, 'godfatherism', nepotism, and opaque networks of influence. The persistence of informal recruitment practices despite formal prohibitions reflects what scholars term "institutional decoupling," which is a situation where organizational practices diverge from stated policies. Ifeanyi (2025) captures this paradox, noting that while "Nigeria does have a

merit-based recruitment process for its civil servants, the public's experience of government ministries, departments and agencies suggests severe performance shortcomings.

#### 4. Literature Review

##### 4.1 Mechanisms of Patronage-based Recruitment in the Nigerian Public Bureaucracy

Patronage-based recruitment constitutes one of the most persistent challenges confronting public service reform in Nigeria. The practice wherein hiring decisions are determined by political connections, ethnic affiliations, or financial inducements rather than applicant qualifications has produced what scholars term "disguised unemployment" within Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs), eroding institutional capacity and public trust (Adebayo & Salau, 2024; Cyprian, 2026). Patronage infiltrates recruitment into the public bureaucracy through political interference, where elected officials or agency heads directly pressure civil service commissions to appoint specific individuals, bypassing competitive processes (Yohanna Mari & Kiden Tanimu, 2026). Procedures are manipulated in such a way that formal recruitment criteria are altered to the advantage of preferred candidates. This may include tailoring job descriptions to specific individuals' profiles, shortening application windows to exclude outsiders, or weighting selection criteria to favor subjective characteristics over objective qualifications (Atoyebi, 2025). Also, individual officials accumulate sufficient control over recruitment processes to effectively determine outcomes unilaterally. The case of an agency head who populated 189 of 190 positions with co-ethnics exemplifies this dynamic, as does the Senate's finding that "recruitment at senior levels is influenced more by internal preferences than by merit and fairness" (The Eagle Online, 2025, para. 15).

While patronage affects the entire public service, certain sectors and regions exhibit distinctive patterns. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) has been identified as a case study in patronage-driven dysfunction, with research demonstrating that the appointment of political cronies and ruling party supporters to the NDDC board has weakened oversight mechanisms and fostered poor accountability (Niger Delta Development Commission Study, 2025, p. 3). Similarly, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPCL) and its subsidiaries, the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC), and the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration

and Control (NAFDAC) were specifically named in Senate proceedings as agencies with documented federal character violations (The Eagle Online, 2025). Some appointments are influenced by nepotism, sidelining other states of the federation. The investigation explicitly linked federal character violations to "institutional favoritism" where "top positions in federal agencies are dominated by select regions" (News Agency of Nigeria, 2026).

Another mechanism of patronage infiltration in the recruitment process in the public bureaucracy is the emergence of job racketeering as an organized informal economy within public service recruitment. Job racketeering refers to the systematic practice of selling public service positions, with prices varying according to the desirability and salary grade of the position (Cyprian, 2026). This mechanism represents the commodification of public employment, where access is mediated not by merit or even political connection in the traditional sense, but by direct financial transaction. Investigative reporting has documented the scope and scale of this practice. A 2025 investigation found that job racketeering cartels operate within virtually all government ministries, departments, and agencies, with prices ranging from 500,000 to 2.5 million Naira depending on the agency (Atoyebi, 2025). The mechanism operates through various channels, such as human resource personnel colluding with external agents, senior officials reserving "slots" for sale, and fraudulent recruitment advertisements designed to extract payments from desperate applicants (Adebayo, 2026). Yohanna Mari and Kiden Tanimu (2026) contextualize job racketeering within broader patterns of political patronage, arguing that "while patronage can secure political support for elected officials, it often undermines the professionalism and effectiveness of the public service, as appointees are selected based on political affiliation rather than expertise or merit". Job racketeering represents the most extreme manifestation of this infiltration, where even political affiliation becomes optional and direct payment suffices as the currency of access (Cyprian, 2026).

'Godfatherism' is yet another mechanism through which patronage-based recruitment operates. This term connotes the concentration of recruitment authority in the hands of political patrons who control access to positions within their spheres of influence (Amanze & Gulu, 2025). Unlike job racketeering's explicit monetization, slot allocation operates through networks of obligation, where political godfathers claim the right to nominate candidates for positions within agencies nominally governed by competitive examination. This mechanism functions through the

suspension of formal recruitment protocols. When a vacancy arises, rather than initiating a competitive process through the Federal Civil Service Commission, agencies receive directives from political principals to accommodate specific candidates. As Elekwachi and Ufomba (2024) stated, selective promotion and recruitment practices within the Ebonyi state civil service are directly influenced by political patrons. The mechanism extends beyond initial recruitment to encompass promotions, postings, and access to training opportunities.

The persistence of godfather-mediated recruitment is reinforced by what Ifeanyi (2025) identifies as the “absence of political will for reform”. Despite the existence of formal merit-based recruitment rules, the political ecosystem continues to rely on patronage, ethnic balancing, and personal loyalty as essential mechanisms of governance. The gap between formal rules and operational practice persists because political actors derive systematic benefits from maintaining discretion over recruitment. The cumulative effect of these infiltration mechanisms is profound bureaucratic dysfunction with cascading governance consequences. When recruitment systematically incline towards loyalty, financial capacity, or ethnic connection rather than competence, the result would be a civil service that lacks the technical capacity to design, implement, or evaluate policy effectively. Yohanna Mari and Kiden Tanimu (2026) assert that "patronage-driven appointments" directly contribute to "inefficiency, corruption, and inequitable distribution of resources" in policy implementation.

Beyond competence deficits, patronage infiltration generates a legitimization crisis. When citizens perceive that public employment is accessible only through political connections or financial payments, public trust in state institutions erodes. This erosion has cascading effects as citizens are less likely to comply with regulations, cooperate with policy implementation, or view the state as a legitimate actor deserving of tax revenues and political support (Ikpebe, Akinrinmade & Asempah, 2025). The brain drain phenomenon represents a particularly consequential secondary effect of these infiltration mechanisms. As a public commentator observed, "Nigeria's best brains are being systematically poached by Western countries (Europe, U.K, Canada, Australia, and America) to boost and sustain their virile systems" (Guardian Newspaper, 2026). When talented Nigerians cannot access public service positions through meritocratic processes, they either emigrate or withdraw from the formal public sector, further depressing institutional capacity and creating a

vicious cycle of competence erosion (Amanze & Gulu, 2025).

#### **4.2 Institutional Damage/Capacity Gaps Resulting from Patronage-based Recruitment**

Patronage-based recruitment is not merely about inefficiency but a mechanism of institutional degradation that erodes technical expertise, distorts policy implementation, and entrenches long-term institutional fragility; this undermines the very foundation of effective, equitable public administration (Bersch, Praca & Taylor, 2021). A very severe consequence of patronage-driven recruitment is the deterioration of workforce quality. When positions are allocated based on political connections rather than competence, public institutions accumulate personnel lacking the skills, knowledge, and motivation to perform their assigned functions effectively. Cyprian's (2026) empirical analysis found that while recruitment processes were significantly associated with workforce quality, political interference consistently reduced this association, indicating that even when formal procedures exist, patronage undermines their effectiveness.

Productivity consequences are similarly severe. Studies of Nigerian public service consistently report high rates of absenteeism, low output per employee, and poor service delivery outcomes. While multiple factors contribute to these patterns, the demoralizing effect of watching unqualified political appointees secure positions that qualified candidates are denied cannot be overstated (Atoyebi, 2025; Amanze & Gulu, 2025). Also, patronage systems typically produce high turnover, as appointees are replaced when political administrations change. This churning erodes institutional memory—the accumulated expertise, historical knowledge, and professional relationships that enable effective policy implementation. Successive waves of politically appointed officials arrive without familiarity with ongoing programs, established processes, or past lessons learned, forcing institutions to perpetually restart rather than build progressively on prior achievements.

The Niger Delta Development Commission provides an instructive case. Despite receiving substantial financial allocations for over 22 years, the Commission has failed to deliver sustainable development outcomes, with researchers attributing this failure partly to "the appointment of political cronies ... [which] has weakened oversight mechanisms" (Niger Delta Development Commission Study, 2025, p. 3). Each new board composition brings new priorities, new contractors, and new opportunities

for patronage distribution, ensuring that long-term strategic planning remains impossible.

Perhaps the most sinister consequence of patronage recruitment is the erosion of public trust in government institutions. When citizens perceive that employment is allocated based on "who you know" rather than "what you know," the legitimacy of public institutions is fundamentally compromised. Survey data indicate that public confidence in Nigerian civil service institutions has declined steadily over the past decade, with corruption and unfairness in recruitment consistently cited as contributing factors (Transparency International, 2025). This legitimacy crisis has practical consequences beyond public opinion. Citizens who believe institutions are fundamentally unfair are less likely to comply with regulations, less likely to cooperate with government programs, and more likely to seek informal alternatives to formal state services. The result is governance fragmentation, which further undermines state capacity, creating a vicious cycle of institutional decline.

#### **4.3 Reform Initiatives aimed at mitigating the Dynamics of Patronage-based Recruitment**

In recent years, the Nigerian public bureaucracy has witnessed significant reform initiatives aimed at combating patronage infiltration. The administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has pursued what it terms the "Renewed Hope Agenda," emphasizing merit-based recruitment across federal agencies. The Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS) conducted a transparent, nationwide recruitment exercise in 2024, processing over 8,000 candidates and ultimately employing 1,200 with no "hidden slot-sharing schemes" (Atoyebi, 2025). The Nigeria Customs Service similarly conducted a technology-driven recruitment process, attracting 573,519 applicants for 3,927 positions, with digital systems limiting opportunities for political manipulation (Atoyebi, 2025; News Agency of Nigeria, 2025). These initiatives suggest that technology-enabled transparency can constrain certain forms of patronage infiltration. When recruitment processes operate through verifiable digital portals with transparent selection criteria, the scope for slot allocation and job racketeering diminishes. However, Ifeanyi (2025) argues that the political will to make reforms work as they ought to is a very essential caveat. He stated further that the scaffolding for reform exists, but the incentives for political actors to accept constraints on their recruitment discretion remain absent. Also, even successful reforms at individual agencies coexist with continued patronage infiltration.

The Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC) Strategic Plan (2026–2030) unveiled in September 2025, is another reform initiative introduced to address systemic recruitment processes in the Federal civil service. The Strategic Plan prioritizes digital transformation by introducing nationwide competitive examinations and digital recruitment platforms alongside automating HR operations. The National Council of Civil Service Commissions also urged state civil service commissions to adopt and implement a human resource management information system promptly (Federal Ministry of Information & National Orientation, 2026). These technological interventions address specific mechanisms through which patronage operates. Historically, opaque recruitment processes enabled "slot-sharing schemes" wherein political elites distributed positions without public scrutiny. However, digital portals create visibility, wherein application numbers become countable, selection ratios become calculable, and geographical distribution becomes verifiable. The Federal Character Commission (FCC) portal would enable users to connect directly with verified recruiting agencies, thus bypassing intermediaries who might demand illicit payments for access.

The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and Federal Character Commission (FCC) have also focused on the enforcement against specific abuses. In July 2025, the two agencies announced the establishment of a Joint Task Force explicitly targeting "job racketeering and related abuses" in public sector recruitment. The Joint Task Force's mandate encompasses monitoring recruitment patterns across MDAs, investigating breaches of the federal character principle, preventing backdoor appointments, and advising on policy reforms that promote job equity and fairness (ICPC, 2025). The Joint Task Force model draws on Articles 5 and 36 of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), which emphasize institutional synergy in anti-corruption enforcement.

In May 2025, the Nigerian Senate mandated its Committee on Federal Character to investigate federal character violations across ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), following a motion sponsored by Senate Minority Whip Senator Osita Ngwu. Senator Allwell Onyesoh, chairing the investigative hearing, stated that "persistent and non-compliance by many MDAs on recruitment and infrastructure allocation had fuelled marginalization and deepened discontent," calling for "urgent reforms, possibly including a Federal Character Compliance Tribunal". It was emphasized that the committee's approach was "not punitive, but corrective," aiming to foster accountability, reinforce equity, and restore trust in the

country's national institutions (Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025).

Technological digitization has emerged also as a complementary strategy for reducing patronage opportunities in recruitment. In April 2026, the Federal Character Commission launched a digital portal tailored for job seekers across Nigeria, designed to revolutionize the job search experience for qualified Nigerians. The portal enables users to easily pinpoint states with active recruitment, access vital accommodation information, and connect directly with verified recruiting agencies. FCC officials describe the initiative as a significant leap towards a fairer and more transparent public service, designed to promote accountability and compliance among MDAs (News Agency of Nigeria).

The reform strategies examined in this discourse demonstrate that patronage-based recruitment in the Nigerian public service can be mitigated through coordinated interventions targeting institutional gatekeeping, enforcement partnerships, digital transparency, political leadership, and cultural transformation. The FCSC 2026–2030 Strategic Plan provides a comprehensive framework for merit-based human resource management. The ICPC-FCC Joint Task Force addresses enforcement gaps that previously allowed violations to proceed without consequence, while digital recruitment technologies create auditability and transparency that reduce opportunities for manipulation. It is worthy of note that no single strategy proves sufficient in isolation. Institutional gatekeeping without enforcement remains aspirational; digital transparency without political leadership can be circumvented; state-level reforms without federal coordination remain fragmented. The most effective approach integrates multiple strategies simultaneously, recognizing that patronage is a systemic phenomenon requiring systemic responses.

#### **4.4 Barriers to Implementations of Reforms Initiatives for Solving Patronage-based Recruitment**

Despite promising reform frameworks, implementation faces substantial obstacles. A very significant barrier is the absence of sustained political will among elected officials who benefit from patronage arrangements. Yohanna Mari and Kiden Tanimu (2026) observe that patronage can secure political support for elected officials, creating powerful incentives to maintain rather than dismantle existing systems. Political leaders who have built their coalitions through patronage distribution are unlikely

to support reforms that would eliminate this mechanism for securing loyalty. The Senate's 2025 investigation into federal character violations explicitly noted that institutional inertia and a lack of accountability have undermined reform efforts, with recruitment at senior levels being influenced more by internal preferences than by merit and fairness (The Eagle Online, 2025, para. 15). This pattern suggests that even when formal policies change, entrenched practices may persist without mechanisms for enforcement and accountability.

The Federal Character Commission (FCC), constitutionally empowered to monitor compliance with diversity requirements, remains hindered by chronic underfunding, political interference, and limited enforcement capabilities (The Eagle Online, 2025, para. 27). Similarly, the ICPC, despite documenting extensive recruitment violations, lacks authority to impose meaningful sanctions on non-compliant agencies. The 2025 Scorecard's finding that 52 MDAs completely ignored audit requests, with no subsequent disciplinary action, illustrates this enforcement gap (Businessday NG, 2025). Without credible enforcement mechanisms, which include the power to invalidate non-compliant recruitment exercises, suspend offending officials, and refer cases for criminal prosecution, reform frameworks remain aspirational documents rather than binding constraints on behavior.

The tension between meritocracy and the Federal Character Principle creates legal complexities that patronage networks exploit. While the Constitution mandates equitable representation across states and ethnic groups, it does not specify how this principle should be operationalized alongside meritocratic criteria. The result is what the Senate identified as "confusion between merit-based recruitment and equitable state representation, to the detriment of discipline, morale and institutional efficiency" (The Eagle Online, 2025, para. 16). Some reformers argue for clarification of the legal framework to establish that federal character compliance should operate at aggregate institutional levels rather than individual positions, thus allowing agencies to recruit the most qualified candidates for each role while ensuring overall workforce diversity. However, such clarification would require legislative action that remains politically contentious.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Political patronage in Nigerian public bureaucracy recruitment represents a fundamental governance failure with cascading consequences for institutional

capacity, service delivery, and democratic legitimacy. The evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that patronage operates through multiple mechanisms, such as political override, procedural manipulation, job racketeering, and gatekeeper capture, to systematically undermine merit-based selection. The resulting capacity gap manifests as workforce quality deficits, institutional memory erosion, and a legitimacy crisis that erodes citizen trust in government. Patronage networks benefit powerful actors who will resist changes that threaten their access to state resources. Overcoming this resistance requires a coordinated strategy combining institutional strengthening (civil service commissions with genuine independence), technological transparency (digital systems that reduce discretionary manipulation), legal reform (clarifying the relationship between merit and equity), and enforcement mechanisms (credible sanctions for violations). Technology offers powerful tools for reducing discretionary manipulation of recruitment processes. FCSC's commitment to e-recruitment and computer-based promotion exercises represents a positive direction, but implementation must ensure that digital systems are designed to minimize human override capabilities.

## 6. Suggested Policy Recommendations

Effective reform requires credible enforcement mechanisms. The following suggested policy recommendations are herewith proffered:

- The establishment of a Federal Character Compliance Dashboard jointly hosted by the Federal Character Commission (FCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) to publicly presents annual recruitment data for each MDA, disaggregated by relevant information such as state of origin, gender, qualification tier, and position type. This would help to track appointments and allow for real-time scrutiny by the public.
- The joint task force of the FCC and ICPC should be empowered to halt or invalidate recruitment exercises that fail minimum compliance thresholds, with repeat offenders to face criminal charges under the Public Service Rules and ICPC Act.
- Whistleblower protection should be strengthened. The legal and security framework to ensure the protection of insiders willing to expose patronage networks should be provided.
- There should be a mandatory publication of complete nominal rolls for every MDA,

including current staff with dates of employment, roles, and states of origin. This transparency measure would enable civil society monitoring and expose ghost worker schemes and nepotistic insertions.

- The National Assembly should amend the Federal Character Commission Act to specify that compliance should be assessed at aggregate institutional levels rather than individual positions, allowing MDAs to recruit the most qualified candidates for each vacancy while maintaining overall workforce diversity through strategic recruitment planning.
- Provisions should be made for private right of action allowing candidates who can demonstrate they were excluded due to violations of merit or federal character principles to seek judicial remedy, as the current legal frameworks offer limited recourse for individuals harmed by patronage-driven recruitment.

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