

UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN



THE THREE HUNDRED AND SECOND (302ND) INAUGURAL LECTURE

“EQUALITY AS ILLUSION: ASYMMETRICAL DIMENSIONS OF POLITICS AND POLICY IN A COMPETITIVE WORLD”

By

PROFESSOR FATAI AYINDE AREMU
Dip. Adult Education (Jos); B.Sc. Political Science (Jos);
M.Sc. Political Science (Sokoto);
Ph.D. Asia Pacific Studies (Japan)

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE,
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES,
UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN, NIGERIA**

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The Vice-Chancellor

Professor Wahab Olasupo Egbewole, SAN
LL.B (Hons) (Ife); B.L (Lagos); LL.M (Ife); Ph.D. (Ilorin)
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My Lords, Spiritual and Temporal,
Distinguished Invited Guests, Gentlemen of the Press,
Students of the Department of Political Science and other
Students here present,
Great Students of the University of Ilorin,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

Preamble

In the Name of Allah, The Most Beneficent, The Most Merciful.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, by the special grace of Almighty Allah, I stand before you with profound gratitude and humility to deliver the 302nd Inaugural Lecture of this great citadel of learning, the University of Ilorin, proudly celebrated as the *Better By Far* University. This moment is not merely personal; it is a continuation of a noble intellectual journey shaped by visionaries who have defined and refined the discipline of Political Science within this institution. From the pioneering inaugural lecture

from the Department of Political Science delivered on 6th December 1984 by the late Professor Adeoye A. Akinsanya on “Transnational Corporations and Economic Nationalism in the Third World,” to the thought-provoking contribution of Professor Mojeed Olujinmi A. Alabi on 13th November, 2014 on “Politics and Law: Anatomy of the Siamese Twins,” and the compelling reflections of Professor Emmanuel Olugbade Ojo on 16th October, 2025 titled, “The Worship of an Unknown Deity,” each lecture has enriched our intellectual heritage and expanded the frontiers of knowledge.

Today, I am deeply honoured to stand on the shoulders of these distinguished scholars, drawing inspiration from their legacy as I contribute my voice to this enduring tradition of inquiry and scholarship. It is within this continuum of excellence that I present the 302nd Inaugural Lecture, titled “**Equality as Illusion: Asymmetrical Dimensions of Politics and Policy in a Competitive World.**” This lecture seeks to interrogate the uneven terrains of power, policy, and participation in our contemporary world, challenging assumptions, provoking thought, and advancing new perspectives. In doing so, I invite this distinguished audience to join me on a reflective journey into the complexities that define our political and policy realities, and the possibilities that lie ahead.

Early Life and Academic Career

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, before I proceed into the substance of this Lecture, kindly permit me to share a few defining moments from my life’s journey; a journey that reflects the quiet power of grace, perseverance, and purpose. I was born into the humble and values-driven family of Alhaji Salman Haruna and Alhaja Khadijah Salman Haruna of Oniyeye-Yowere in Asa Local Government Area of Kwara State. My early foundation was shaped in Oloje, Ilorin, where I received Arabic and Islamic education under the guidance of the late Sheikh Mohammad Thani Alabi Aladie. I began my formal schooling at Mount Carmel Demonstration Primary School, Oloje, and later attended Asa Local Government Commercial Secondary School, Bakase,

a rural community where life was defined by scarcity. There was no electricity, no potable water, and yet, there was hope. To support my family, I embraced dignity in labour: I learned barbing under Alhaji Saka Ile Alaro, engaged in traditional *Aso Oke* weaving, and worked in a bakery. In those moments of struggle and “hustle,” the idea of standing here today as a Professor belonged only to the realm of dreams.

Vice-Chancellor Sir, with your kind permission, let me fast-forward to the next chapter of my life journey. From Kwara State Polytechnic, Ilorin, where I undertook my IJMBE programme, I proceeded to the University of Jos to earn a Diploma in Adult Education and Community Development, and subsequently a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science with honours. I further obtained M.Sc. degree in Political Science from Usmanu Dan Fodio University, Sokoto. I obtained Ph.D. in Asia Pacific and Development Studies from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in Beppu-shi, Oita-ken, Japan. I joined this great University of Ilorin as a Graduate Assistant in 2001. By the special grace of Almighty Allah and through years of dedication, discipline, and divine favour, I rose through the academic ranks to become a Professor in 2019. This journey, from modest beginnings to academic fulfillment, stands as a testament to what is possible when resilience meets opportunity, and when faith meets hard work.

Introduction

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, we often speak of politics as if it were a level playing field. We invoke ideas of fairness, balance, equality, and rational competition. We teach students that institutions create order, that rules govern outcomes, and that policy emerges from reasoned deliberation. However, the world we inhabit tells a different story, a story where influence is unevenly distributed, where power does not speak in equal voices, where access to opportunity is structured long before competition begins. The reality is: **Equality is an Illusion!** Yet, we continue to analyse politics and policy as though symmetry

were the norm rather than the exception. This inaugural lecture is an invitation to rethink that assumption. This lecture takes off with the argument that politics and policy are fundamentally shaped by asymmetry. And that asymmetry in terms of power, of information, of institutions, of history is not an anomaly. It is the organising principle of political life in a competitive world.

To make sense of global politics, domestic governance, and policy outcomes, we must consciously shift our analytical lens from the comforting language of equilibrium to the harsher reality of imbalance; from assumptions of equality to the persistence of hierarchy; and from formal rules to the deeper currents of power that truly shape outcomes. For too long, mainstream political science has leaned on elegant models that assume rational actors, stable institutions, balanced competition, and predictable results. These frameworks offer clarity, but often at the cost of realism. In practice, politics unfolds in uneven terrains where asymmetries of power, information, and influence are not exceptions but defining features.

This intellectual tradition is rooted in the influential works of scholars such as Downs (1957), Olson (1971), and Riker (1973), whose contributions helped institutionalise rational choice as a dominant approach to political analysis. In particular, Downs' seminal work, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, conceptualises democracy as a system driven by strategic behavior, incentives, and efficiency considerations, while also acknowledging its inherent limitations most notably voter apathy and the constraints imposed by imperfect information. Yet, while these models illuminate important dynamics, they also risk underestimating the distortions introduced by structural inequalities and power imbalances. A more compelling understanding of politics, therefore, lies not in abandoning these theories, but in stretching them by interrogating their assumptions and situating them within the complex, asymmetrical realities of the contemporary world.

The difficulty, however, is that these elegant theories often conceal a more uncomfortable truth. This is why I argued

that contrary to the assumptions of rational choice models, global politics is not a level playing field governed primarily by rules and predictable incentives; it is a domain where power defines both the rules and their application (Aremu, 2011). Powerful states do not merely operate within established frameworks, they shape them, reinterpret them, and, when necessary, sidestep them. Rules tend to hold only to the extent that they do not threaten their core interests. Episodes such as the military actions undertaken by the United States and Israel against the Iran, without clear authorisation from the United Nations Security Council or even full domestic legislative backing, illustrate a recurring pattern: in moments of high stakes, the calculus of power often overrides the discipline of rules and the logic of formal rationality.

Vice-Chancellor Sir, a similar dynamic unfolds within domestic politics. Here, too, outcomes are less the product of neutral competition and more the reflection of entrenched asymmetries. Political and economic elites shape access to resources, opportunities, and even the policy agenda itself. What appears on the surface as open competition is frequently structured by invisible advantages—networks, influence, and institutional control—that tilt the field long before choices are made. In such contexts, rationality does not disappear; rather, it is embedded within unequal structures that privilege some actors over others. This logic of embedded asymmetrical power relations was applied in our analysis of executive-legislative relations where we drew attention to the ascendance of executive powers to the detriment of the legislature (Aremu, Bakare & Abayomi, 2017). To understand politics more fully, therefore, we must move beyond models that assume balance and instead confront the enduring reality of power, hierarchy, and asymmetry.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, this reality compels us to rethink not only how we study politics, but how we interpret its outcomes. If power quietly structures opportunity, shapes preferences, and determines whose voice counts, then what we

often celebrate as competition may, in fact, be a carefully managed contest with predetermined advantages. The implication is profound: policies, institutions, and even democratic processes may reflect not the collective will, but the unequal capacity of actors to influence outcomes. In this light, the task before scholars and practitioners is not merely to refine existing models, but to interrogate the very foundations upon which they rest. The critical question, therefore, is this: if power so decisively shapes the rules and outcomes of the political game, can we truly speak of fairness and rationality in politics? Or, are these ideals themselves products of the very asymmetries we seek to understand?

Unpacking the Concept of Asymmetry

Vice-Chancellor Sir, please permit me to unpack the concept of “asymmetry” in order to get the epistemological foundations of how “**Equality is an Illusion!**” and its implications for domestic and foreign policies. Asymmetry, in its most compelling sense, is the condition in which actors operate from unequal positions of power, capacity, information, and influence. It is also expressed where these inequalities shape both the rules of engagement and the outcomes that follow. It is not merely difference; it is *structured imbalance*. In both domestic and international environments, asymmetry explains why similar actors, playing ostensibly by the same rules, experience vastly different possibilities and results. It shifts our attention from what is formally declared: laws, institutions, norms, to what is actually operative: who has the capacity to define reality, set agendas, and determine whose interests prevail?

In the international arena, asymmetry is stark and often unapologetic. The global system, though clothed in the language of sovereignty and equality, is deeply hierarchical. In my work on Japan’s trade relations with East Asia countries, I concluded that asymmetrical dependence on a superordinate nation determines the preferences of the dependent country (**Aremu**, 2009). Powerful states possess disproportionate military,

economic, and diplomatic leverage, enabling them to shape international norms, influence multilateral institutions, and, at times, act outside agreed frameworks with limited or no consequences. Less powerful states, by contrast, operate within tighter constraints, often compelled to adapt, align, or acquiesce. Here, asymmetry manifests not only in material capabilities but also in agenda-setting power, who defines what counts as a “threat,” what constitutes “legitimate action,” and whose security or prosperity takes precedence. The result is a world in which formal equality coexists with practical inequality.

Domestically, asymmetry is subtler, but no less consequential. Political systems may proclaim equal citizenship and open competition, yet access to power and resources is unevenly distributed. Elites-political, economic, bureaucratic-often possess advantages that are not immediately visible, but deeply influential: networks of patronage, control over information, institutional familiarity, and the ability to shape narratives. These advantages structure opportunities long before any formal contest begins. Thus, elections, policy debates, employment opportunities, contract awards, and the overall governance processes may appear inclusive, yet they are frequently underwritten by asymmetrical access and influence. In such settings, rational decision-making does not occur in a vacuum; it is conditioned by unequal starting points and constrained choices.

Conceptually, asymmetry forces us to confront a critical insight: politics is not simply a domain of rules and rational actors, but a field of contested power relations where inequalities are reproduced, negotiated, and sometimes challenged. It invites us to move beyond the illusion of balance, and to interrogate the deeper architecture of advantage and disadvantage that shapes behavior and outcomes. To engage seriously with asymmetry is to recognise that understanding politics requires not only analysing decisions, but also uncovering the unequal structures within which those decisions are made. Let us now turn to one of the major theories on asymmetry: Asymmetrical Dyads.

Asymmetrical Dyads Theory

Asymmetrical dyads theory is the outcome of intellectual efforts aimed at understanding the nature relationships between two unequal actors-states, institutions, or individuals-who possess markedly unequal power, capabilities, or status. Instead of treating inequality as a background condition, the theory places it at the center of analysis, asking a simple but powerful question: *what happens when one side is clearly stronger than the other?*

At its core, the theory is most closely associated with Womack (2011), who argues that asymmetry produces *different perceptions, priorities, and strategies* on each side of the relationship. The stronger actor typically sees the relationship as routine, stable, and low-risk; the weaker actor, by contrast, experiences it as highly consequential and potentially threatening. This difference in attention alone creates a structural imbalance: the weaker side is often more attentive, more reactive, and sometimes more strategic in navigating the relationship, while the stronger side may underestimate its partner or overlook signals of tension.

One of the key insights of asymmetrical dyads theory is that *conflict does not arise simply from power differences, but from misperceptions generated by those differences*. The stronger actor may assume compliance or alignment, while the weaker actor seeks recognition, respect, and autonomy. When these expectations diverge, friction emerges not necessarily because interests are incompatible, but because each side interprets the relationship through a different lens. In this sense, asymmetry is not just about capability; it is about *psychology, perception, and interaction*. At the level of family, among friends, in the community, and between countries, this disparity in attention and expectations creates opportunity for conflict.

Another important contribution of the theory is its challenge to the conventional assumption that weaker actors are always passive. On the contrary, weaker states or actors often exercise *strategic agency* through *diplomacy, alliance-building,*

norm entrepreneurship, or even selective resistance, to manage or offset asymmetry. They may “play for recognition,” seek to raise the cost of domination, or exploit the stronger actor’s blind spots. Thus, asymmetry produces not only domination, but also adaptive behavior and subtle forms of resistance.

In his incisive and provocative works, Womack (2001) engaged the question of how 'disparity of attention' results in asymmetrical (mis) perception that generates conflict between large and small countries. While the larger side is likely to commit errors of under-attention, Womack argued, the smaller side is likely to commit errors of over-attention. Because country A (the larger/stronger side) and country B (the smaller/weaker side) operate from different vantage points of the asymmetry pendulum, A is likely to be inattentive as a result of other 'more pressing' matters, whereas B would be tempted to act like an allergic paranoia. He applied this framework to a number of cases including China and Vietnam on the one hand, and Vietnam and Cambodia on the other. The same theoretical proposition was used to analyse US-China relations as well as China's policy in Southeast Asia.

Vice-Chancellor Sir, please permit me to note that asymmetrical dyads theory owes much of its contemporary development and systematic exposition to the studies conducted under the Asymmetrical Dyads and Foreign Policy Project. The theory was designed to probe the foreign policies of subordinate states as it relates to a state's movement toward and away from a superordinate partner. It is based on the assumption that foreign policy actors are governments acting as the agents of the state, and that government conducts foreign policy in pursuit of the goals of economic well-being and political autonomy, both of which compete in the relationship with superordinate actor. According to Dolan, et al. (1982), it is the relationship between both goals and the constraints imposed on foreign policy by that relationship that distinguishes subordinate states from other national actors. This is because subordinate states in asymmetrical dyad expect that an increase in relations "both in

scope or magnitude of exchanges and agreements, will result in increased economic well-being and decreased political autonomy.” With respect to the goal of economic well-being, an increase in relations within an asymmetric dyad is expected to yield for the subordinate state, greater market access and capital either in the form of investment or development assistance as well as technical and managerial skills by the superordinate partner. The relative emphasis placed on either of the two goals at any given time constitutes an important challenge to foreign policy makers.

From the foregoing, it is further assumed that the emphasis given to either economic well-being or political autonomy depends on the state of the domestic economy of the subordinate country and the degree of linkage concentration on the superordinate state. In other words, the emphasis on the goal of economic well-being varies inversely with the state of the domestic economy while emphasis on the goal of political autonomy varies directly with the degree of linkage concentration on the superordinate country. Linkage concentration is measured in terms of the proportion of subordinate state's external relations (for instance, aid, investment or trade) with the superordinate state. It follows that the higher the concentration of linkage, the higher the vulnerability of the subordinate state to alteration in the dyadic relationship. Vulnerability, according to Caporaso and Levine (1992), entails the relative availability and costliness of alternatives. This stems from the fact that dyadic relationship is characterised by both structural and relational asymmetry. The former refers to the differential power resources available to the state which gives the superordinate partner greater influence in the international environment, while the latter connotes unequal degree of involvement in the relationship.

Foreign policy, according to exponents of the theory such as Dolan *et al.* (1982) and Womack (2011), comprises of both objectives and behaviour. In asymmetrical dyads, two foreign Policy objectives are identified, *reinforcement* objective

at one end and *regulation* objective at the other. In between *reinforcement* and *regulation* objectives is *accommodation* which signifies a mixture of both extremes. *Reinforcement* refers to the desire to increase or intensify relations with the superordinate country while *regulation* indicates a desire to limit or restrict relations with the superordinate country. *Accommodation* connotes a desire to harmonise or reconcile the competing extremes of reinforcement and regulation. The absence of a desire for change is referred to as *maintenance* objective indicating a desire to keep the *status quo* in the dyad. The theory also produced a typology schema that merged the foreign policy objectives with particular forms of behaviour as shown in figure 1 below:

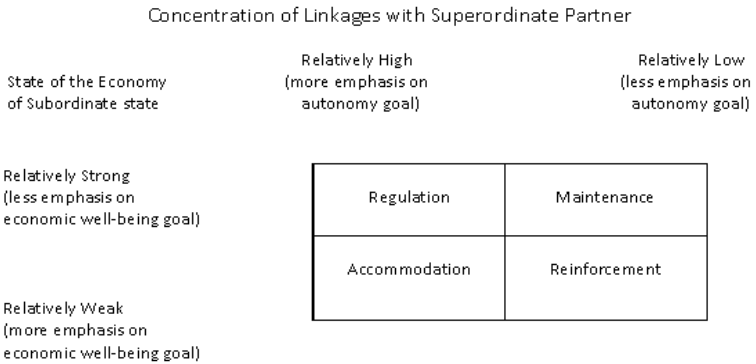


Fig. 1: Typology of Asymmetrical Foreign Policy Behaviour

Source: Dolan *et al.* (1980)

Along the continuum of foreign policy objectives, the theory also identified specific behavioural dimensions and actions concerned with the level of transactions, extent of policy coordination and extent of policy alignment. The level of transactions symbolises behaviour that attempt to affect by expression of support for or concern on the level of transaction in the dyad. Policy coordination indicates behaviour that utilises formal bilateral institutions and/or other mediums to achieve similar or complementary policies in the dyad. The opposite of

this dimension refers to the termination or refusal to utilise formal bilateral institutions or reluctance to work together to achieve similar, complementary or joint policies. Policy alignment, according to asymmetrical dyads theory, entails behaviour ‘which supports or opposes the position or policy of the superordinate nation.’

In **Aremu** (2011), I expanded the behavioural patterns that are associated with each of the foreign policy objectives. Suppose the principal foreign policy objective is *reinforcement*, the desire to expand relations with the target partner would make the government to make attempts to increase the level of transactions and to seek to increase opportunity for policy coordination. In the case of policy *alignment*, the expectation of economic gains would logically propel the government to modify or adopt supportive (rather than critical) policy towards the super-ordinate country. With respect to the *regulation* objective on the other hand, the behavioural pattern would be the opposite of the reinforcement objective. *Accommodation*, as noted by exponents of the theory, is a hybrid of both 'asserting autonomy under conditions of concentrated linkages and improving the economy by increasing relations with the super-ordinate party' (Womack, 2011:45).

It is a combination of conflicting aims and may produce certain traits of inconsistent behavioural patterns. With respect to the maintenance objective, it is likely to exist under the conditions of relative economic prosperity and a relatively low linkage concentration. Under such circumstance, there would be stronger incentive to preserve the status quo.

Beyond international relations, the logic of asymmetrical dyads travels well into domestic politics. Relationships between central governments and subnational units, political elites and citizens, bosses and staff, or supervisors and students all reflect similar patterns of how unequal power shapes expectations, communication, and outcomes. The stronger party often assumes that automatic compliance should be taken for granted; the weaker party seeks voice and acknowledgment. Where these

expectations clash, governance problems, institutional breakdowns, or conflict may arise.

In essence, asymmetrical dyads theory invites us to move beyond viewing power imbalance as a static condition and instead understand it as a dynamic relationship, one defined by unequal attention, divergent expectations, and ongoing negotiation. Its enduring insight is that stability in unequal relationships depends not on eliminating asymmetry, but on managing it through recognition, restraint, and mutual adjustment.

My Contributions to Scholarship

Mr. Vice Chancellor, my contributions to knowledge have been consistently anchored in interrogating the asymmetrical structures that shape international relations and political outcomes, particularly within Afro-Asian relations and the broader global political economy. In my early works on asymmetry studies, I laid the foundation for this intellectual trajectory by examining how two major Asian powers engaged Africa within historically conditioned and structurally unequal contexts (Aremu, 2007). In that work, I demonstrated that while both Japan and China pursue strategic interests on the continent, their approaches reflect differing historical experiences, diplomatic philosophies, and capacities, yet both operate within an asymmetrical framework that places African states in varying positions of dependence and negotiation.

This line of inquiry was further deepened in a later study (Aremu, 2009), where I analysed how countries such as Japan and Korea navigate their relationships with East Asian partners under conditions of unequal interdependence. I argued that foreign policy behaviour cannot be fully understood through the lens of rational calculation alone, but must be situated within the structural constraints imposed by dependence and power imbalance. In a related study (Aremu, 2009), I extended this argument to Japan–Africa relations, demonstrating how disparities in economic power, technological capacity, and diplomatic leverage shape both the content and trajectory of

engagement. Complementing these works, my collaborative research with H.A. Saliu on the *global financial meltdown* (Aremu & Saliu, 2009) highlighted how systemic shocks disproportionately affect emerging economies, reinforcing existing inequalities within the international system.

My contribution to knowledge in the field of international relations, strategic studies, and political economy has evolved through a sustained interrogation of the dynamics of conflict, cooperation, governance, and development across multiple contexts. Broadly, my scholarship is anchored on understanding how structural pressures, domestic imperatives, and institutional arrangements interact to shape state behaviour and policy outcomes in both global and local arenas.

In my work on Asia's energy politics (Aremu, 2011), I examined the complex interplay between rivalry and collaboration. The study demonstrated that energy security challenges in the region are not merely sources of zero-sum competition but also catalysts for strategic cooperation. By foregrounding interdependence and the multiplicity of actors involved, the work contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how resource politics can simultaneously generate tension and accommodation within the international system.

This external orientation in asymmetrical dynamics is complemented by my application of the framework to the understanding of Nigeria's foreign policy, (Aremu, 2010), where I interrogated the ideational and domestic underpinnings of foreign policy. In that work, I critiqued the elevation of prestige as a central driver of Nigeria's external engagements, arguing that symbolic aspirations often obscure pragmatic considerations and weaken strategic coherence. The study thus provided a critical lens for reassessing the motivations and outcomes of Nigeria's foreign policy behavior whereby the quest for regional relevance is underpinned by the reality of operating on the lower end of asymmetry pendulum.

Extending this line of inquiry, my subsequent works explored the nexus between diplomacy, development, and

international partnerships. In particular, I demonstrated how technical assistance functions as an instrument of soft power, enabling Nigeria to project influence while fostering regional solidarity and capacity-building. The study advanced the argument that non-coercive mechanisms of engagement are central to achieving both national interest and continental integration while actively seeking to blunt the sharp edges of asymmetry in a competitive global environment by projecting soft power within Africa and beyond. In the same vein, I provided a comparative analysis of Nigeria's engagement with two major Asian powers. The study highlighted the divergent strategic approaches and developmental implications of Nigeria's relations with Japan and China, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how African states navigate both traditional and emerging centres of global power.

Beyond foreign policy and international engagement, my research also engaged deeply with questions of governance, political institutions, and development outcomes within Nigeria and comparable contexts. In **Aremu**, Bakare and Abayomi (2017), I examined the interplay of power between branches of government at the sub-national level. The study revealed how institutional imbalances and political alignments shape accountability, policy implementation, and democratic practice, thereby enriching existing debates on federalism and governance in Nigeria. In a related vein, I applied the political settlements framework to interrogate the constraints on employment generation in a key sector of the economy (**Aremu**, Kwaghe, Agbibo, & Jijji, 2016). The study demonstrated that development outcomes are deeply embedded in elite bargains, institutional configurations, and policy choices, offering critical insights into the challenges of achieving inclusive growth.

At the intersection of governance and state-society relations, my contribution to a multi-country study provided a comparative perspective on how deficiencies in public service delivery can trigger contentious politics. The study advanced the understanding that protests over energy are not merely

spontaneous reactions to scarcity but are rooted in broader political and institutional dynamics. By situating Nigeria within a wider global context, the work highlighted both shared patterns and context-specific drivers of social unrest in fragile settings (Aremu, *et al.*, 2018).

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, my contribution to knowledge has also significantly engaged with the role of legislative institutions in democratic governance, particularly within Nigeria's evolving political landscape. In a co-authored study with Bakare, I provided a conceptual and analytical foundation for understanding the legislature as a critical pillar of democratic practice (Aremu & Bakare, 2021). The chapter situated the legislature within broader governance frameworks, emphasising its roles in representation, lawmaking, and oversight, while also highlighting the contextual challenges that shape its effectiveness in emerging democracies.

Building on this foundation, we offered a comprehensive assessment of two decades of Nigeria's National Assembly (Aremu & Bakare, 2021). The study critically evaluated the achievements, limitations, and evolving dynamics of legislative politics since the return to democratic rule in 1999. It demonstrated that while the legislature has made notable strides in institutional consolidation and policy engagement, significant challenges remain in areas such as executive–legislative balance, accountability, and public trust. The power asymmetry continues to swing against the legislature as an institution while the executive enjoys overriding ascendancy thereby raising concerns on the applicability of checks and balances in democratic governance.

Taken together, these studies underscore a central thread in my scholarship: that neither structural forces nor domestic considerations alone can adequately explain state behaviour or development outcomes. Rather, it is the interaction between international pressures, internal political dynamics, and institutional arrangements that produces the patterns of conflict, cooperation, governance, and contestation observed in practice.

In this regard, my work contributes to bridging the gap between international relations and domestic political analysis, while also advancing policy-relevant insights into how states, particularly in Africa, can more effectively navigate the complexities of global engagement, institutional governance, and sustainable development.

More recently, my scholarship extended into the domain of development interventions, civic agency, and accountability, with a particular focus on how external actors and grassroots movements shape governance outcomes in Nigeria. In **Aremu** (2022), I examined the role of international development partners in fostering citizen empowerment and institutional accountability. The study interrogated the assumptions underpinning donor-driven initiatives and demonstrated that while such interventions can create opportunities for civic engagement, their effectiveness is often mediated by local political dynamics, institutional constraints, and the agency of domestic actors.

More fundamentally, the study revealed that donor-driven reforms are rarely neutral exercises in development cooperation; rather, they often reflect the asymmetrical realities of a competitive world in which financial power, technical expertise, and agenda-setting capacity are unevenly distributed. In many instances, external actors possess disproportionate influence in defining priorities, designing frameworks, and determining measures of success, while recipient societies are expected to adapt to externally constructed visions of reform. Thus, even within the language of partnership and development, underlying hierarchies of power continue to shape whose voices matter, whose knowledge counts, and whose interests ultimately prevail, thereby bringing to the fore the reality that indeed, *Equality is an Illusion!*

Complementing this perspective, my contribution to a collaborative study on the #BBOG movement (Aina, Atela, Ojebode, Dayil & **Aremu**, 2019) provided an in-depth analysis of one of Nigeria's most prominent social movements. The study

moved beyond simplistic characterisations of digital activism to show how the #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG) movement combined online mobilisation with sustained offline engagement to demand accountability and influence public discourse. It highlighted the complex interplay between citizen action, state response, and international attention, thereby enriching our understanding of contemporary forms of civic engagement in fragile democratic contexts.

Vice-Chancellor Sir, the forgoing discussions bring into sharper focus a defining concern in my body of work: the relationship between institutions, external interventions, and citizen agency in shaping governance and development outcomes. They underscore the limits of top-down approaches while affirming the transformative potential of collective action and context-sensitive engagement strategies.

Taken together with my earlier works on foreign policy (Aremu, 2011a, 2009a & 2009b), regional cooperation (Aremu, 2011b 2013a, 2013b & 2014), legislative governance (Aremu & Bakare, 2021; Aremu, Bakare & Aabayomi, 2017), political settlements, and state–society relations (Aremu, Kwaghe, Agbiboa & Jiji, 2016), this body of scholarship reflects a coherent and evolving research agenda. At its core is a sustained effort to bridge the divide between international and domestic politics, and between theory and practice. It demonstrates that the challenges of governance, development, and global engagement, particularly in Africa, are best understood through an integrated lens that accounts for structural forces, institutional dynamics, and the agency of both state and non-state actors.

In sum, my contribution to knowledge lies in advancing a multidimensional understanding of how states navigate complexity, externally in their strategic interactions, and internally in their governance processes. Therefore, my works form a coherent and evolving body of scholarship unified by a central concern: that asymmetry, manifested through unequal dependence, differential capacity, and structural hierarchy, is not incidental, but foundational to understanding international

relations, foreign policy behaviour, domestic politics and development outcomes. They collectively challenge orthodox assumptions of balance and mutuality, and instead foreground the enduring reality that power, in its various forms, continues to shape the possibilities and limits of global engagement.

My Contributions to Capacity Building and Mentorship

Vice-Chancellor Sir, beyond the traditional call to teach and to publish, I have embraced a broader mission, the nurturing of minds, the strengthening of institutions, and the building of capacity across Nigeria and the African continent. I have been privileged to serve among the select cadre of facilitators at the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR), a transformative pan-African institution based in Nairobi, Kenya. Through this platform, I have engaged with and mentored generations of policy-oriented researchers, equipping them not only with analytical tools, but with the confidence and critical perspective required shaping Africa's governance and development trajectories. These engagements have reaffirmed my belief that knowledge must travel beyond the classroom, it must empower, it must influence, and it must transform.

In the same spirit, my involvement in the Pedagogical Leadership in Africa (PeDAL) initiative has allowed me to contribute to the reimagining of teaching and learning within our universities. Through this programme, we have trained lecturers across the continent on innovative, student-centered pedagogical practices designed to enhance learning outcomes and institutional relevance. These experiences, taken together, represent a deliberate commitment to multiplying impact, ensuring that the knowledge we produce is not confined to journals and lecture halls, but is translated into capacity, leadership, and lasting change across Africa.

As part of my commitment to strengthening public financial management and governance systems in Africa, I have participated in and contributed to key capacity development initiatives, including: Training Workshop on Budget Tracking, Monitoring and Reporting, organized by the West African

Institute for Financial and Economic Management (WAIFEM). This workshop enhanced competencies in budget oversight, expenditure tracking, and performance-based reporting, supporting improved fiscal accountability and transparency. Budget Transparency and Accountability Training Workshop focused on advancing open budgeting practices, strengthening institutional accountability, and promoting citizen engagement in the budget process.

In advancing evidence-based policy, governance, and research excellence across Africa, I have actively engaged in high-level training programmes that strengthen analytical capacity, methodological rigour, and knowledge sharing, including: Multi-Method Research Course (MMRC), organised by the Partnership for Social and Governance Research (PASGR) in collaboration with the Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex, held in Nairobi. This program strengthened advanced research design skills, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods for policy-relevant research and mentorship of emerging scholars.

Vice-Chancellor Sir, driven by a deep conviction that Africa's future must be shaped by the strength of its ideas and the quality of its knowledge producers, I founded Research Enterprise Systems (RES), a pan-African, non-partisan platform dedicated to advancing evidence-driven decision-making. The vision was born from a simple but urgent realization: sustainable development and effective governance cannot thrive in environments where policy is disconnected from credible research evidence. RES, therefore, emerged not merely as an organization, but as a response to a continental need, to build a vibrant ecosystem, where reliable, timely, and policy-relevant knowledge can inform governance, development, and social transformation across Africa.

Over the years, RES has evolved into a dynamic platform for empowering young African researchers through mentorship, capacity building, and collaborative learning. Working with distinguished colleagues, institutions, and

development partners, we have implemented a range of interventions aimed at strengthening policy-oriented research, advancing research communication, and deepening methodological competence among emerging scholars. At the heart of these efforts lies a commitment to nurturing a new generation of African knowledge producers who are not only intellectually grounded, but also capable of translating research into meaningful societal impact. For me, this is more than professional engagement; it is an investment in Africa's intellectual future and in the transformative power of knowledge to shape a better continent.

Vice-Chancellor Sir, my contributions to community development go beyond capacity building and mentorship of younger generation of African researchers, it extends to physical projects in several communities. I have mobilised and invested resources in the provision of boreholes and solar lightings. I have offered education support to many indigent families through payment of WAEC and JAMB forms, payment of school fees and provision of tables and chairs to schools. In partnership with Ilorin Emirate Youth Development Association (IEYDA), I have supported economic empowerment for women, most of whom are managing thriving businesses today.

My Contributions to Administrative and Community Service in the University

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, beyond the responsibilities of teaching and research which I have done to the best of my ability since 2001, I have remained deeply committed to administrative service and community engagement within this great University. I have always believed that a university thrives not only through intellectual production, but also through the collective sacrifices of those willing to serve in often demanding and less celebrated capacities. It has therefore been both a privilege and a responsibility for me to contribute to the growth, stability, and institutional development of the University of Ilorin through various administrative and academic assignments over the years.

In the course of this journey, I had the honour of serving as acting Head of the Department of Political Science for some years, where I worked alongside dedicated colleagues to strengthen academic standards and departmental cohesion. For many years, I served as the Departmental Coordinator of Postgraduate programmes. I also served as Secretary of the Faculty Committee on the Creation of the B.Sc. Psychology Programme, contributing to the expansion of academic opportunities within the Faculty. My commitment to quality assurance and institutional advancement further found expression through service on the Faculty Committee on Institutional Accreditation during the 2011/2012 session, the Faculty Examinations Monitoring Committee, and the Departmental Task Force on the Compilation and Computation of Results. Beyond these, I represented the Faculty in engagements with the Faculty of Engineering and served as an Ex-Officio Member of the National Executive Council of the Nigerian Political Science Association.

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, perhaps some of the most fulfilling aspects of my service have come through mentorship and engagement with students. For many years, I served as Level Adviser, guiding students through both academic and personal challenges. I also worked closely with several student associations, including Junior Chamber International and *The Advocate*, as Staff Adviser. These engagements provided opportunities not merely to supervise activities, but to nurture leadership, character, and civic consciousness among young people. Looking back, I consider these contributions not as isolated appointments, but as part of a larger commitment to building an institution where scholarship, service, mentorship, and community spirit continuously.

Conclusion

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, as I draw this lecture to a close, I return to the question with which I began: Why do societies that speak so passionately about equality continue to produce unequal realities? Perhaps the answer lies in a truth we often hesitate to confront, that politics has never been played on a perfectly level field. The rules may be written equally. The institutions may appear neutral. The promises may be universal. Yet, beneath these ideals lies an uneven terrain shaped by history, power, access, and voice. And it is upon this terrain that human lives unfold. To study politics, therefore, is not merely to study governments or policies. It is to study how hope travels through unequal structures. Throughout my scholarly journey, I have come to believe that the responsibility of political science is not only to explain power, but to illuminate its consequences, to make visible the asymmetries that quietly organise opportunity, dignity, and belonging. Because when asymmetry remains unseen, inequality appears natural. But when it is understood, change becomes imaginable.

The task before us, scholars, leaders, policymakers, students, and citizens alike, is not to pretend that society is symmetrical. It is to ask a more courageous question: How do we govern wisely in an unequal world? How do we design institutions that hear distant voices? How do we craft policies that recognise different starting points? How do we build societies where difference does not become disadvantage? These are not merely academic questions. They are moral questions. They are developmental questions. They are human questions. And perhaps, this is where the true promise of scholarship lies, not in claiming final answers, but in expanding society's capacity to see itself more honestly. If politics shapes the field upon which life is lived, then scholarship must help societies reshape that field, gently where possible, courageously where necessary, and always with humanity at its center.

Today, I stand here not only as a professor reflecting on past inquiry, but as a learner still convinced that ideas matter, that institutions can evolve, and that more inclusive futures remain possible. For ultimately, the purpose of knowledge is not admiration, it is transformation. And the purpose of politics, at its best, is not power alone, but dignity. May our scholarship continue to reveal the uneven ground beneath us. May our institutions grow wiser in response to it. And may future generations inherit a field made more just because we chose to understand it more deeply. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, if asymmetry is the defining condition of our political and policy environment, then neutrality is no longer sufficient. We must act deliberately, think critically, and govern courageously. The challenge before us is not merely to understand inequality, but to confront it, to manage it, and where possible, to transform it.

Recommendations

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, it is in light of the foregoing discussion that I put forward the following recommendations:

Policy and Governance Recommendations

1. *Reframe policy design around realism of power, not formal equality*: Governments must move beyond the illusion of equal actors and design policies that explicitly recognize asymmetries in capacity, access, and influence. Policy frameworks should incorporate power mapping by explicitly identifying who benefits, who is excluded, and who shapes outcomes, before implementation. This could be done by incorporating in policy documents “Considerations for Equality” that acknowledges the reality of how the policy could shape and be shaped by embedded asymmetries. Ministries, Departments and Agencies as well as other government institutions should be required to conduct “Equality Concern Audits” on their respective policies and programmes as a starting point.

2. *Institutionalise equity-sensitive governance mechanisms:* Institutions should embed corrective mechanisms that level the playing field through targeted interventions for marginalised groups, inclusive budgeting, and participatory governance platforms that amplify underrepresented voices like women, youth, persons with disability, refugees and internally-displaced persons. There is the need to enforce the requirements that grants specific quota for women, persons with disability, refugees and internally-displaced persons with respect to opportunities that would improve their livelihood.
3. *Strengthen strategic state capacity:* In asymmetrical environments, weak states are not simply operating from positions of disadvantage; they are often structurally constrained by limited institutional capacity, economic dependence, technological deficits, and unequal bargaining power. Consequently, the pathway to meaningful autonomy and competitiveness lies in the deliberate construction of a capable, strategic, and developmental state. This recommendation becomes actionable when translated into concrete governance, economic, and institutional reforms. Therefore, Nigerian government must prioritise merit-based public service recruitment, continuous policy training, data-driven governance, and professionalised bureaucracies capable of long-term strategic planning. This should be supported with strategic investment in agriculture, manufacturing, technology, creative industries and local value chains in order to reduce dependency and enhance economic resilience.
4. *Pursue smart diplomacy, not passive alignment:* States in the Global South cannot effectively navigate an asymmetrical international system through isolated or reactive diplomacy. In a world where power is unevenly distributed, strategic and interest-driven diplomacy becomes essential for protecting national interests,

expanding bargaining power, and reducing structural vulnerabilities. Therefore, Nigeria should continue to actively engage and utilise regional blocs and continental platforms such as African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and similar regional mechanisms. Similarly, countries in the Global South should continue to deepen South-South cooperation by expanding collaboration in education, technology, agriculture, health, and innovation with countries facing similar developmental realities. Partnerships among African, Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern countries can reduce excessive dependence on traditional Western donors and institutions.

5. *Renegotiate global engagements through an asymmetry lens:* In an asymmetrical and highly competitive world, trade agreements, development partnerships, and security alliances often carry hidden costs that can deepen vulnerable dependence, weaken domestic industries, constrain policy autonomy, and reinforce external influence over national priorities. In order to address this problem, Nigeria and other weaker states need to invest in strategic diplomatic capacity and negotiation expertise. In many international negotiations, weaker states are disadvantaged not only by limited resources but also by technical gaps. Governments should therefore train specialised diplomats, trade negotiators, and policy experts capable of navigating complex issues such as climate finance, digital governance, artificial intelligence regulation, global taxation, and international trade law. Additionally, states must prioritise reciprocity and value addition in trade relations. Many developing countries continue to export raw materials while importing finished goods, perpetuating unequal exchange relationships. Governments should therefore negotiate agreements that support local manufacturing, technology transfer, and industrial upgrading. This includes insisting on local

content provisions, skills transfer programmes, joint ventures, and investment in domestic supply chains rather than allowing extractive economic relationships to persist.

6. *Deconstruct dominant theories and rebuild context-sensitive frameworks:* African scholars cannot meaningfully explain African realities using frameworks that were developed in vastly different historical, institutional, and socio-economic contexts without first interrogating their assumptions. Many inherited theories in political science, economics, and development studies are built on assumptions of equilibrium, institutional neutrality, rational competition, and relative equality among actors. Yet, the lived realities across many African societies are shaped by asymmetries, unequal access to power, weak institutional capacity, informality, patronage networks, external dependence, and historical inequalities. The challenge, therefore, is not to reject global theories outright, but to critically adapt, refine, and where necessary, reconstruct them to better reflect African experiences. To achieve this, African scholars must embrace context-driven theorisation. Research should begin not with the question, “Which Western theory fits this problem?” but rather, “What does this reality reveal?” Scholars should derive concepts and explanatory models from empirical African experiences. Universities and research institutions should encourage problem-oriented rather than citation-oriented scholarship.
7. *Cultivate asymmetry-aware leadership:* Leaders often make decisions within systems that appear neutral on the surface but are, in reality, shaped by hidden inequalities in access, opportunity, representation, and influence. These inequalities often exist across class, gender, ethnicity, geography, age, disability, institutional hierarchy, or access to information. If leaders are not trained to recognise such asymmetries, policies and decisions can

unintentionally reproduce exclusion and deepen existing disparities. Developing “asymmetry-aware leadership” therefore requires deliberate institutional and professional reforms. For instance, leadership training programmes should incorporate equity and power analysis as core competencies. Leaders must be taught how to ask critical questions before making decisions: Who benefits from this policy? Who may be excluded? Who had a voice in the decision-making process? Whose interests are invisible? Such reflective analysis helps leaders move beyond surface-level assumptions of fairness. When leaders are asymmetry-aware, they are less likely to overlook hidden inequalities and they will intentionally include women, youth, marginalised communities, frontline workers, and local stakeholders in consultations, advisory groups, and policy formulation processes.

8. *Ensure ethical leadership*: Ethical leadership in the 21st century can no longer be defined merely by personal integrity or compliance with rules. In increasingly unequal and asymmetrical societies, ethical leadership requires the ability to recognise structural imbalances, of power, opportunity, voice, and access, and the courage to take deliberate corrective action. A leader may be personally honest and yet preside over systems that perpetuate exclusion, marginalisation, or unequal treatment. The true test of ethical leadership today, therefore, lies not only in avoiding wrongdoing, but in actively promoting fairness, inclusion, and institutional justice. Therefore, institutions should embed *fairness and inclusion audits* into governance processes. Recruitment, promotion, procurement, budget allocation, and access to services should be periodically reviewed to identify hidden patterns of exclusion or imbalance. Ethical leadership becomes meaningful when supported by systems that monitor fairness rather than relying solely on individual goodwill.

9. *Empower citizens through information and agency:* An informed and engaged citizenry is one of the strongest safeguards against the concentration of power and the reproduction of asymmetry in society. Where citizens lack access to information, civic knowledge, or meaningful participation, governance becomes vulnerable to manipulation, elite domination, misinformation, and unaccountable decision-making. Conversely, citizens who understand their rights, responsibilities, and the workings of institutions are better positioned to demand accountability, influence policy, and resist exclusion. Building such a citizenry requires deliberate, long-term, and practical interventions. In order to achieve this goal, governments and institutions must expand access to reliable and timely public information, strengthen civic education at all levels of society and institutionalise participatory spaces for public engagement. There is the need to ensure regular town hall meetings, citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting forums, policy consultations, and community monitoring initiatives to provide opportunities for citizens to contribute to decision-making processes. Participation becomes more meaningful when citizens are involved before decisions are finalised.

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Èjìrẹ̀ aráìṣokún. (Twins, natives of Isokun) Èdúnjobí. (You are the monkey's child)

Ọmọ ẹdun tíṣeré orígi. (Children of the monkey, who plays on treetops)

Ó-bẹ-kẹṣé-bẹ-kàṣà, (Jumping hither and thither)

Ó fẹṣẹ̀ méjèjèjì bẹsílẹ̀ alákiísa; (They jumped with both legs into a tattered house)

Ó salákiísà donígba aṣọ. (And turned the owner of the tattered clothes into owner of hundreds of clothes)

Gbajúmò ọmọtígbàkúnlẹ̀ iyá, (Famous children who receive their mother's kneeling adoration)

Tíígbàdòbálẹ̀ lówó baba tóbí í lómọ. (And receive their father's prostrations)

Wínrinwínrin lójú orogún. (A sparkling sight to the co-wife)

Ejìwòrò lojúiyá ẹ̀. (Two lovely children to their own mother)

Tani o bi beji kon'owo? (Who can have twins and not be rich?)

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