

Constructing Democracy and Legitimate Leadership: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address

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Abstract

This article examines how democracy and legitimate political leadership are discursively constructed in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address delivered before a joint session of Nigeria's National Assembly. The study adopts Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate the interaction between textual features, discursive practices and wider socio-political structures in the address. The data comprise the 2025 Democracy Day speech, which foregrounds Nigeria's democratic history, the June 12 struggle, political pluralism, economic reform, freedom of expression and collective national responsibility. The analysis reveals that Tinubu strategically employs inclusive pronouns, modality, metaphor, parallelism, contrast, repetition, evaluative language and historical references to construct democracy as a hard-won collective achievement and an unfinished national project. At the level of discursive practice, the address recontextualises the memory of military rule and the June 12 struggle to connect past democratic sacrifices with contemporary political leadership. At the level of social practice, the discourse legitimises presidential authority by associating the administration with democratic continuity, political tolerance, economic development and national progress. The article argues that the address transforms democratic memory into a significant resource for political legitimation while simultaneously constructing leadership as both an exercise of presidential authority and a collective responsibility. The study contributes to scholarship on Nigerian political discourse by demonstrating how commemorative presidential rhetoric functions as a site for negotiating the relationship between democracy, memory, power and political legitimacy.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Democracy, Political Legitimacy, Presidential Discourse, Tinubu

1. INTRODUCTION

Political discourse constitutes an important site for the construction, negotiation and legitimation of power. Political leaders do not merely use speeches to communicate policies or report governmental activities; they also employ language to construct identities, define political realities, justify actions and influence how audiences understand leadership and the nation. From a critical discourse perspective, language is therefore inseparable from relations of power and ideology. Political texts can reproduce particular understandings of social reality while simultaneously legitimising certain political actors, institutions and courses of action.

Presidential speeches are particularly significant in this regard because they combine institutional authority with rhetorical persuasion. Through such speeches, presidents may construct themselves as responsible leaders, align themselves with the people, invoke shared national values and present their policies as necessary or beneficial. Studies of Nigerian political discourse have similarly shown that linguistic resources such as metaphor, pronouns, evaluative language and historical references can be deployed to construct political identities, project ideological positions and negotiate relations of power. Recent studies of Nigerian presidential and campaign discourse, for example, demonstrate the continuing importance of Critical Discourse Analysis for examining how political language represents self and others, constructs ideological interests and seeks to persuade particular audiences.

Democracy occupies a particularly important position in Nigerian political discourse because of the country's historical experience of military rule and the subsequent restoration of civilian government in 1999. Consequently, democratic language in Nigeria is often inseparable from memories of authoritarianism, political struggle, resistance and sacrifice. Recent research on Nigerian political rhetoric further shows that democracy itself can be metaphorically framed in ways that support political legitimation, while historical and ideological contexts remain crucial to understanding presidential discourse.

Within this historical context, 12 June has acquired a distinctive symbolic significance. The date commemorates the democratic struggle associated with the annulled 12 June 1993 presidential election and has become an important site of collective memory in contemporary Nigerian political culture. A Democracy Day address delivered on this occasion is therefore more than a routine presidential speech. It provides an opportunity for the political leader to invoke the past, interpret the present and project a vision of the nation's political future. The commemorative context makes democratic memory a potentially powerful discursive resource through which political authority and leadership may be constructed.

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address is particularly suitable for such an examination. Delivered before a joint session of the National Assembly, the address connects Nigeria's democratic past with contemporary concerns about political plurality, economic reform, freedom of expression, national development and collective responsibility. The speech recalls the sacrifices of individuals and groups associated with the democratic struggle, condemns authoritarianism and political repression, defends multiparty democracy and presents the administration's policies and programmes as evidence of purposeful leadership. It also repeatedly invokes collective expressions such as *we*, *our* and *us*, thereby constructing democracy and national development as shared projects.

Existing studies have examined Nigerian political discourse from different critical and linguistic perspectives, including presidential inaugural speeches, campaign rhetoric, political manipulation and the discursive construction of power. Other studies have specifically applied Fairclough's framework to Nigerian presidential discourse and have demonstrated the importance of analysing the relationship between textual choices, discursive processes and wider socio-political contexts. However, the present

study is distinguished by its focus on a post-election commemorative presidential address centred explicitly on Democracy Day and the symbolic memory of June 12. Rather than treating the speech simply as an instance of political persuasion, the article examines how the discourse transforms democratic memory into a resource for constructing contemporary political legitimacy and legitimate leadership.

The study is, therefore, guided by the argument that Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address performs a dual discursive function. On the one hand, it commemorates Nigeria's democratic past by recalling military repression, pro-democracy struggles and the sacrifices of democratic actors. On the other hand, it strategically connects this historical memory with the present by representing the administration and its leadership as aligned with democratic continuity, political plurality, tolerance and national development. The address thus links memory, democracy and legitimacy, enabling the speaker to construct contemporary political authority within the moral and historical framework of the democratic struggle.

To investigate this relationship, the article adopts Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which conceptualises discourse as simultaneously involving text, discursive practice and social practice. The model makes it possible to examine the linguistic features through which meanings are constructed, the historical and political discourses upon which the address draws, and the wider relations of ideology and power within which the speech operates.

Accordingly, the article addresses the following questions:

1. How does Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address linguistically construct democracy and legitimate political leadership?
2. How does the address draw on democratic memory and other discursive resources to legitimise contemporary political authority?
3. What ideological representations of power, national identity and leadership emerge from the interaction between the text, its discursive context and the wider Nigerian socio-political environment?

By addressing these questions, the article contributes to scholarship on Nigerian political discourse, presidential rhetoric and Critical Discourse Analysis. Its central contribution lies in demonstrating that commemorative political discourse can function simultaneously as an act of remembrance and a strategy of legitimation. Specifically, the study shows how the memory of democratic struggle may be recontextualised to establish continuity between past sacrifice and present leadership, thereby constructing political authority as historically grounded and democratically legitimate.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature and discusses the theoretical framework. This is followed by the methodology, which explains the data and analytical procedure. The subsequent section presents the analysis and discussion, focusing on the construction of democracy, democratic memory, political legitimacy and leadership. The final section summarises the major findings and states the article's contribution to the study of political discourse.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Political Discourse, Democracy and Legitimacy

Political discourse is not simply a means through which political leaders communicate information to the public. It is also a means through which political actors construct identities, represent social realities, advance ideological positions and legitimise particular forms of authority. Within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), political language is, therefore, examined not only for what it says but also for how its linguistic and rhetorical choices are connected with power, ideology and wider social relations.

Studies of Nigerian political discourse have consistently demonstrated the strategic nature of political language. Recent analyses of Nigerian presidential and campaign discourse show that politicians employ such resources as pronouns, metaphor, repetition, naming, evaluative language and framing to persuade audiences, project positive political identities and construct relations of power. Inclusive language, in particular, can construct solidarity between political actors and their audiences while simultaneously advancing particular ideological interests.

The relationship between discourse and legitimation is especially important in presidential communication. Political leaders must continually present their authority, actions and policies as appropriate and beneficial. Consequently, speeches may invoke national history, shared values, collective aspirations and governmental achievements to justify leadership and secure public acceptance. Recent studies of Tinubu's political discourse similarly demonstrate how presidential language can be used to frame reforms, construct ideological positions and legitimize governmental authority.

Democracy is particularly significant within Nigerian political discourse because contemporary democratic governance is interpreted against the background of military rule, political resistance and the struggle for democratic restoration. References to these experiences can therefore do more than provide historical information; they can function rhetorically by connecting contemporary political actors and institutions with the moral authority of past democratic struggles. It is this relationship between historical memory and contemporary political legitimation that provides the principal focus of the present article.

2.2 Studies on Nigerian Political and Presidential Discourse

A substantial body of research has examined Nigerian political discourse from different linguistic and critical perspectives. Earlier CDA studies established the importance of examining how Nigerian political actors use discourse to construct identities, ideological positions and relations of power. More recent scholarship has extended this interest to presidential campaigns, inaugural addresses, policy speeches, Independence Day addresses and digital political communication.

For example, Jibrin and Oguche (2025) analyse the campaign speeches of select candidates in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election and show how rhetorical and intertextual strategies are employed to persuade audiences and advance ideological interests. Similarly, Ogunlana and Oamen (2025) examine power dynamics in Nigerian presidential campaign discourse through a Faircloughian perspective, highlighting the strategic deployment of linguistic resources in constructing political power and projecting favourable images of political actors.

Other studies have focused more specifically on individual political figures and speeches. Recent analyses have examined rhetorical devices in Atiku Abubakar's campaign discourse, ideological strategies in Peter Obi's campaign speeches and the framing of political persuasion in Obi's digital campaign messages. These studies generally demonstrate that Nigerian political communication is characterised by strategic self-presentation, audience alignment, ideological framing and persuasive language.

Scholarship on Tinubu's discourse has also expanded considerably. Recent studies have investigated his inaugural and Independence Day speeches, focusing on manipulation, reform rhetoric, ideology, power, framing and legitimation. For instance, Abolarin-Egbebiola and Dada (2025) examine language as a tool of manipulation in the inaugural speeches of Buhari and Tinubu through Fairclough's three-dimensional model. Muhammad's study of Tinubu's 2023 and 2025 Independence Day speeches similarly examines the evolving rhetoric of reform and the linguistic construction of political legitimation. Other recent research investigates power and ideology in Tinubu's 2024 Independence Day address and framing strategies in his 2023 state-of-the-nation address.

These studies confirm the continuing value of CDA for investigating how political language shapes public understanding of leadership and governance. However, the growing body of work also makes it necessary for new research to define its contribution carefully. The present study differs from campaign and policy-oriented analyses by examining a commemorative presidential address delivered on a nationally symbolic democratic occasion. Its central concern is not simply the identification of rhetorical devices or general ideological strategies, but how the discourse of commemoration converts democratic memory into a resource for constructing legitimate contemporary leadership.

This distinction is particularly important because a recent study by Bala and Kefas has already examined Tinubu's June 12, 2025 Democracy Day speech through CDA, focusing on political legitimacy, national unity, economic reforms, historical memory and socio-political contradictions. The present article must therefore avoid duplicating that study. Its analytical contribution is more narrowly defined: it investigates the speech as a commemorative discourse of democratic memory, asking how recollections of June 12, military repression, democratic sacrifice and political struggle are selectively recontextualised to establish a relationship between the democratic past and the legitimacy of present leadership.

2.3 Research Gap

The review shows that Nigerian political discourse has received considerable scholarly attention and that Fairclough's model remains a productive framework for examining the relationship between linguistic choices, ideology and power. Recent studies have explored campaign rhetoric, presidential speeches, political manipulation, reform discourse, framing and ideological representation. Tinubu's political discourse has also become an important object of scholarly investigation.

Nevertheless, there remains room for a more focused examination of commemoration as a strategy of political legitimisation. While previous studies have identified historical references and democratic values as elements of political discourse, the specific process through which a presidential commemorative address transforms collective democratic memory into legitimacy for contemporary leadership requires closer attention.

The gap addressed by this article, therefore, lies in its focus on the intersection of memory, commemoration and political legitimisation. Rather than treating historical references merely as rhetorical devices, the study examines them as discursive resources through which the speaker establishes continuity between past democratic sacrifice and present political authority. The article consequently argues that Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address performs two interconnected functions: it preserves and interprets a particular version of Nigeria's democratic memory, while simultaneously using that memory to construct contemporary leadership as historically conscious, democratically committed and politically legitimate.

2.4 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

The study is anchored in Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The model conceives discourse as simultaneously involving text, discursive practice and social practice. Its relevance lies in its capacity to connect detailed linguistic analysis with the processes through which discourse is produced and interpreted and with the wider social and ideological structures within which it operates (Nwaoba, 2026).

The first dimension, text, concerns the formal and linguistic properties of discourse. This includes such features as vocabulary, pronoun use, modality, metaphor, repetition, parallelism, evaluation and other rhetorical choices. In the present study, attention is paid to how these textual resources construct democracy, collective identity, authority and legitimate leadership.

The second dimension, discursive practice, concerns the processes through which a discourse draws upon,

reproduces and recontextualises existing discourses. This dimension is particularly relevant to the present article because the Democracy Day Address invokes the June 12 struggle, military rule, democratic resistance and other elements of Nigeria's political history. The analysis therefore examines how these historical memories are selected and brought into a contemporary presidential address to create particular meanings.

The third dimension, social practice, situates discourse within wider relations of ideology, power and social structure. At this level, the article considers how the speech participates in broader struggles over the meaning of democracy, political legitimacy, leadership and national identity in Nigeria. Fairclough's framework is thus useful because it enables the analysis to move beyond the identification of linguistic features towards an explanation of their wider political and ideological significance.

Recent Nigerian CDA studies continue to demonstrate the usefulness of this framework for examining presidential and campaign discourse, particularly where the aim is to connect textual strategies with wider structures of political power and ideology.

In this article, the three dimensions are not treated as rigid and separate stages. Rather, they are integrated throughout the analysis. Linguistic choices are examined in relation to the discourses and historical memories they activate and subsequently interpreted within the broader socio-political context of democratic governance and political legitimisation in Nigeria.

The literature and theoretical discussion establish the basis for examining Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address as more than a ceremonial political speech. The article approaches it as a discourse in which textual strategies, democratic memory and wider relations of political power interact. Fairclough's model provides the analytical link among these levels and makes it possible to investigate how commemoration becomes a means of constructing and legitimising contemporary political leadership.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The design is appropriate because the study is concerned with interpreting how language constructs meanings, ideological positions and relations of political power rather than measuring the frequency of linguistic items statistically. Specifically, the study examines how President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address constructs democracy and legitimate political leadership through the interaction of linguistic choices, historical references and wider socio-political contexts (Nwaoba, 2026).

3.2 Data and Data Selection

The data for the study consist of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address delivered at a joint session of the National Assembly on 12 June 2025. The speech was selected purposively because of its relevance to the objectives of the study and its distinctive commemorative context. As a Democracy Day address, the speech provides a significant site for examining the relationship among democratic memory, political power and contemporary leadership.

The address was also selected because it explicitly engages with major issues relevant to the study, including the June 12 democratic struggle, military rule, democratic continuity, political plurality, freedom of expression, economic reform, national development and collective responsibility. These themes make the speech particularly suitable for investigating how democratic memory and values are discursively connected with the legitimisation of contemporary political authority.

The study does not treat every sentence in the address as an independent unit of analysis. Rather,

purposely select extracts that directly contribute to the construction of democracy, democratic memory, political legitimacy, leadership, national identity and power constitute the principal analytical units. This allows for an in-depth qualitative interpretation of the most relevant segments of the discourse.

3.3 Analytical Framework and Procedure

The data were analysed using Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, comprising text, discursive practice and social practice. The model was applied as an integrated analytical framework rather than as three mechanically separate stages.

At the textual level, the analysis focuses on linguistic and rhetorical features relevant to the construction of meaning. These include pronoun choices, modality, metaphor, repetition, parallelism, contrast, evaluative expressions, imperatives and other significant lexical and grammatical patterns.

At the level of discursive practice, the study examines how the address draws upon and recontextualises existing historical and political discourses. Particular attention is paid to references to the June 12 struggle, military rule, democratic resistance and the sacrifices of pro-democracy actors. The analysis considers how these discursive resources are incorporated into the address and connected with contemporary concerns about political leadership and democratic governance.

At the level of social practice, the identified textual and discursive patterns are interpreted in relation to wider socio-political issues in Nigeria, particularly democracy, political legitimacy, ideology, leadership, national identity and power. This level of analysis makes it possible to explain how the speech participates in broader processes through which political authority is justified and particular understandings of democratic leadership are promoted.

The analytical procedure involved a close reading of the address to identify recurrent and significant linguistic patterns and thematic constructions. Relevant extracts were then grouped according to their contribution to the central concerns of the study. The selected extracts were interpreted by relating their textual features to the historical and political discourses they activate and to their broader ideological implications. Through this procedure, the study examines how democratic memory is recontextualised as a discursive resource for constructing and legitimising contemporary political leadership.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Constructing Democracy through Historical Memory and Collective Identity

A central strategy in Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address is the construction of democracy through the selective recollection of Nigeria's political past. The speech presents contemporary democracy not as an abstract political arrangement but as the outcome of a long and difficult historical struggle. From the opening sections, the President situates the present within a narrative of movement from authoritarian rule to democratic governance:

“Since 1999, democracy has risen from the ashes and destitution of military rule to take its rightful place as the only mode of governance of our resilient and beloved people.”

The metaphor “risen from the ashes” constructs democracy as something that has survived destruction and been reborn. By associating military rule with “ashes and destitution,” the speech creates a sharp contrast between an undesirable authoritarian past and a legitimate democratic present. Democracy is consequently represented not merely as a system of government but as the appropriate political destiny of the Nigerian people. The evaluative expressions “rightful place,” “resilient” and “beloved” further invest this representation with positive moral and emotional significance.

This textual construction also activates a wider historical discourse of Nigeria's transition from military to civilian rule. The reference to 1999 invokes the beginning of the current period of uninterrupted democratic governance, while the memory of military rule provides the negative historical background against which democracy is positively evaluated. In Faircloughian terms, the meaning of the statement emerges not only from its lexical and metaphorical choices but also from the historical discourse that it recontextualises. The past is brought into the present to establish democracy as a hard-won national achievement whose preservation remains necessary.

The same process is evident in the President's commemoration of June 12 and the individuals associated with the democratic struggle. He recalls those who were imprisoned, exiled, tortured, beaten or killed during the military era and subsequently names selected figures who contributed to the struggle. Such references transform the address into an act of collective remembrance. However, remembrance here is not politically neutral. By foregrounding sacrifice and repression, the speech constructs contemporary democracy as morally indebted to those who resisted authoritarianism. The past, therefore, becomes a source of legitimacy for the democratic present.

Particularly significant is the President's assertion that the democratic struggle "was never the province of any one group or section of the country" but was "pan-Nigerian in its conception." This formulation expands democratic memory beyond particular ethnic, regional or political identities. The phrase "pan-Nigerian" functions as a powerful marker of collective identity by representing the struggle as a shared national experience. Through this discursive strategy, democracy becomes one of the symbolic resources through which national unity is imagined and reinforced.

The frequent use of inclusive expressions such as "we," "our" and "us" strengthens this construction. Statements such as "we still have much further to go," "we preserve the institutions of democracy" and "we weave the culture of democracy into the very fabric of our nation" position the President and his audience within a shared democratic community. The pronoun "we" reduces the distance between political leaders and citizens by presenting democratic preservation as a collective responsibility rather than the exclusive duty of government.

The metaphor "weave the culture of democracy into the very fabric of our nation" is, especially revealing. Democracy is represented as a fabric whose strength depends on the interweaving of different parts. This metaphor connects democratic practice with national cohesion and suggests that democracy must become deeply embedded in Nigeria's collective life. Similarly, the temporal parallelism "year by year, election after election" presents democracy as a cumulative process sustained through repeated political practice. Democracy, in this sense, is constructed not as a completed achievement but as a continuing social project.

This representation reaches an important point in the President's statement that Nigeria has travelled far but "still [has] much further to go." The recurring metaphor of movement or journey constructs democracy as unfinished. Such a representation allows the speech simultaneously to celebrate democratic progress and acknowledge the need for further development. It also creates a forward-looking collective responsibility: the achievements of the past must be preserved and extended by the present generation.

At the level of social practice, this construction of democracy is significant because it connects political legitimacy with historical continuity. By placing contemporary governance within the narrative of the June 12 struggle and the wider resistance to military rule, the address implicitly positions present democratic institutions as inheritors of the sacrifices of earlier generations. The authority of the contemporary political order is, therefore, strengthened through its association with a morally valued history of struggle, resistance and sacrifice.

Overall, the analysis shows that historical memory performs a central legitimating function in the address. Through metaphor, evaluative language, historical reference, repetition and inclusive pronouns, the speech transforms Nigeria's democratic past into a shared national narrative. In this narrative, democracy is represented as hard-won, collectively owned, morally valuable and unfinished. More importantly, the remembrance of June 12 establishes the historical framework within which contemporary political leadership is evaluated and legitimised.

The significance of this finding is that commemoration in presidential discourse is shown to be more than ceremonial remembrance. In Tinubu's address, democratic memory becomes a discursive bridge between past sacrifice and present authority. By presenting contemporary democracy as the continuation of a historic struggle, the speech creates a framework in which legitimate leadership can be associated with the protection, preservation and advancement of democratic ideals.

4.2 Negotiating Political Power and Democratic Legitimacy

One of the most politically significant moments in Tinubu's address occurs when he responds to allegations that the growing strength of the All Progressives Congress (APC) could lead Nigeria towards a one-party state. This issue provides an important site for examining how political power is discursively negotiated and how the speaker constructs the legitimacy of his own authority. Rather than merely denying the allegation, Tinubu draws on personal political history, contrast, humour and democratic principles to present himself as ideologically opposed to political monopoly.

The President introduces the issue by stating:

“To those who ring the alarm that the APC is intent on a one-party state, I offer you a most personal promise. While your alarm may be as a result of your panic, it rings in error. At no time in the past, nor any instance in the present, and at no future juncture shall I view the notion of a one-party state as good for Nigeria.”

The expression “those who ring the alarm” metaphorically represents critics as people warning of impending danger. However, the subsequent assertion that the alarm “rings in error” immediately delegitimises the basis of their concern. The contrast between “past,” “present” and “future” extends the President's rejection of a one-party state across time, while the emphatic modal “shall” projects certainty and personal commitment. Through this temporal structure, the speech constructs opposition to a one-party system as a consistent feature of the speaker's political identity rather than a temporary response to contemporary criticism.

The phrase “I offer you a most personal promise” is equally significant. The first-person pronoun “I” foregrounds personal authority and responsibility. Unlike the inclusive “we,” which distributes agency across a collective, “I” enables Tinubu to present himself as an individual political actor making a direct commitment to the audience. Personalisation is therefore used as a strategy of legitimation: the President's own political character is offered as evidence against the allegation.

This strategy becomes more explicit when he states:

“Look at my political history. I would be the last person to advocate such a scheme.”

Here, the imperative “Look at” directly invites the audience to examine the speaker's political past as evidence. Political history becomes a legitimating resource. Instead of relying solely on institutional or legal arguments, the President constructs his previous political experience as proof of his democratic

credentials. This personal appeal also connects the present controversy to the earlier narrative of democratic struggle established in Section 4.1. The speech thus creates continuity between Tinubu's past political identity and his current presidential authority.

The account of the 2003 political crisis develops this argument further:

“In 2003, when the then-governing party tried to sweep the nation clean of political opposition through plot and manipulation, I was the last of the progressive governors standing in my region.”

The metaphor “sweep the nation clean of political opposition” represents the attempted weakening of opposition as an act of political elimination. This negative representation is reinforced by the lexical choices “plot” and “manipulation,” which portray the opposing political force as undemocratic. Against this negative image, the President presents himself as “the last of the progressive governors standing.” The metaphor of standing constructs him as resilient and resistant.

The contrast is, therefore, central to the discourse. A previous ruling party is associated with political overreach and the attempted elimination of opposition, whereas the speaker is represented as the figure who resisted that process. Such self-representation enables the President to claim a moral and political position grounded in democratic resistance. Importantly, the argument does not simply state that he presently supports multiparty democracy; it constructs this support as part of a longer political identity.

The speech intensifies this personal narrative when the President declares:

“Yet, I stood alone. My allies had been induced into defeat. My adversaries held all the cards that a mortal man could carry. Even with all of that, they could not control our national destiny because fate is written from above.”

The repetition of the first-person pronoun in “I stood alone” strongly individualises the narrative. The expression creates an image of political isolation and personal courage. Similarly, the metaphor “held all the cards” represents political power as a game in which the adversary possesses considerable advantages. Yet the narrative reverses this apparent imbalance by presenting the speaker as ultimately victorious in resistance.

The reference to “fate” and a “greater power” also introduces a moral and providential dimension into the political narrative. The outcome is represented as transcending ordinary political calculation. Consequently, the speaker's resistance to a one-party state is not only portrayed as a political position but as part of a larger historical destiny. This strengthens the ideological representation of Tinubu as someone whose political journey is fundamentally connected with the defence of democratic plurality.

The address then explicitly links this past experience with the present:

“The failed effort to create a one-party state placed progressive political forces on a trajectory to form the APC. It put me on the trajectory which has brought me before you today. I dare not do such a favour to any political adversary by repeating the same mistake of political overreach.”

This passage is particularly important to the article's central argument because it transforms political biography into a narrative of legitimate authority. The phrase “the trajectory which has brought me before you today” constructs Tinubu's present position as the outcome of a historical journey. His presidency is therefore discursively connected to an earlier resistance to political domination. The statement “I dare not” expresses a strong moral and political obligation not to repeat the errors attributed to the past.

At the level of discursive practice, this section of the address recontextualises earlier episodes of Nigerian

political competition to interpret a contemporary controversy. The memory of resistance to political domination is selectively brought into the present as evidence that the current President cannot logically support the same practice. The past thus functions as a form of political proof. This demonstrates again how the speech uses historical memory not simply to commemorate events but to negotiate contemporary questions of power and legitimacy.

However, the discourse becomes more complex when Tinubu subsequently states:

“A one-party state is not in the offing. Nor should it ever be. That said, we would be guilty of political malpractice if we closed the door on those from other parties who now seek to join the APC.”

The discourse marker “That said” performs an important argumentative function. It signals a shift from rejecting the idea of a one-party state to justifying the admission of politicians from opposition parties into the APC. This structure allows the President to maintain two positions simultaneously: commitment to political plurality and acceptance of political defections that strengthen his party.

The modal expression “should ever be” establishes political plurality as a normative democratic principle, while “we would be guilty of political malpractice” redefines the acceptance of defectors as a matter of democratic fairness. Rather than presenting the expansion of the ruling party as evidence of political monopoly, the speech constructs refusal to admit willing defectors as the undemocratic act. This is a significant strategy of reframing.

The following statement further illustrates the use of humour and negative representation in political competition:

“Political parties fearful of members leaving may be better served by examining their internal processes and affairs rather than fearfully conjuring up demons that do not exist.”

The metaphor “conjuring up demons” dismisses the fears of opposition parties as imaginary or exaggerated. The repetition of “fearful” reinforces the negative representation of these parties as weak and anxious. At the same time, the advice to “examine their internal processes and affairs” shifts responsibility for defections away from the ruling party and onto the opposition itself.

This strategy is followed by the provocative statement:

“Try your best to put your house in order. I will not help you do so. It is, indeed, a pleasure to witness you in such disarray.”

The metaphor “put your house in order” represents political parties as households whose internal problems require repair. Unlike the solemn democratic language that dominates earlier portions of the speech, this passage adopts a more conversational and confrontational tone. The expression “a pleasure to witness you in such disarray” openly displays the competitive dimension of political discourse. Thus, although the speech advocates democratic plurality, it does not eliminate political rivalry. Instead, it constructs competition as legitimate while simultaneously representing the speaker's opponents as responsible for their own weakness.

This tension is important at the level of social practice. The speech promotes the ideology of multiparty democracy but does so within a political context in which the ruling party is expanding through defections. Legitimation is therefore negotiated through discourse: the President must defend political plurality while explaining why the growing strength of his own party should not be interpreted as an attempt to eliminate opposition. The address manages this tension by separating the principle of political competition from the

freedom of individual politicians to change parties.

This position is finally articulated in the declaration:

“We must welcome and accept the diversity and number of political parties, just as we welcome and embrace the diversity of our population. Our efforts must never be to eliminate political competition, but to make that competition salutary to the national well-being.”

The repeated inclusive pronoun “we” moves the argument from personal defence to collective democratic responsibility. The comparison between the diversity of political parties and the diversity of the Nigerian population constructs political plurality as consistent with the country's wider social character. The modal “must never” establishes the elimination of political competition as a clear democratic boundary.

At the same time, the expression “salutary to the national well-being” qualifies the form of competition being advocated. Political rivalry is represented as legitimate when it contributes positively to national development. This reflects an ideological construction of democracy in which competition and cooperation are not opposites but complementary requirements of governance.

Overall, this section demonstrates that political legitimacy in the address is constructed through a complex interaction of personal history, democratic memory, self-presentation and ideological positioning. At the textual level, pronouns, modality, metaphor, temporal contrast and evaluative language enable the speaker to present himself as a consistent defender of democratic plurality. At the level of discursive practice, past political experiences are recontextualised as evidence supporting contemporary claims to democratic legitimacy. At the level of social practice, the discourse engages with broader tensions surrounding political power, party dominance and democratic competition in Nigeria.

The analysis, therefore, reinforces the article's central argument: democratic memory functions as a resource for political legitimation. In this instance, however, the memory is not only collective but also personal. Tinubu's political biography is woven into the larger history of resistance to political domination, allowing him to construct his present leadership as the continuation of an established democratic identity. Yet the section also reveals the inherently strategic nature of political discourse, as the defence of democratic plurality operates alongside efforts to justify the political expansion and dominance of the ruling party.

4.3 Discourses of Development, Leadership and National Responsibility

Beyond the commemoration of democratic history and the defence of political plurality, Tinubu's address constructs legitimate leadership through a discourse of economic reform, development and collective national responsibility. If democratic memory provides a historical basis for legitimacy, the representation of governmental performance provides its contemporary justification. The speech therefore moves from recalling past sacrifices to presenting the administration as capable of delivering economic progress, institutional reform and national development.

This shift is signalled by the assertion:

“Upon assuming office, my team and I moved to reform our ailing economy. We introduced fundamental reforms to correct structural imbalances that prevented maximum growth.”

The expression “my team and I” combines presidential authority with collective agency. Unlike the exclusive emphasis on “I” in the defence of personal democratic credentials, this construction presents governance as a collaborative enterprise. The possessive expression “my team” nevertheless retains the

President's leadership position, while “we” distributes responsibility for governmental action among the administration.

The lexical description of the economy as “ailing” personifies Nigeria's economic condition as a sick body requiring treatment. This metaphor provides the basis for representing reform as necessary intervention. Similarly, “fundamental reforms,” “correct structural imbalances” and “maximum growth” draw upon the discourse of economic management and technical expertise. The administration is consequently constructed as rational, purposeful and capable of diagnosing and addressing national problems.

The speech strengthens this representation through a series of quantitative and achievement-oriented claims:

“We are already seeing results. GDP grew by 3.4 per cent in 2024, with Q4 hitting 4.6 per cent, the highest quarter of growth in over a decade. Inflation is easing gradually ... Our net foreign reserves have increased fivefold, and the Naira exchange rate has stabilised.”

The declarative statement “We are already seeing results” functions as a framing device for the statistics that follow. The figures are presented as objective evidence of governmental success. This gives the discourse an appearance of factual authority and enables the administration's policies to be represented as effective. The repetition of positive expressions such as “grew,” “easing,” “increased,” “stabilised” creates a lexical pattern of improvement and recovery.

The use of the first-person possessive “our” in “our net foreign reserves” also transforms economic indicators into collectively owned national achievements. Although the administration claims responsibility for reform, the benefits are linguistically connected to the wider national community. This movement between governmental agency and collective ownership is important to the construction of leadership. The administration acts, but the nation is represented as the beneficiary.

The same strategy is evident in references to consumer credit, youth empowerment, education and infrastructure:

“We are committed to giving more opportunities to young people through job creation and skills development.”

The pronoun “we” again constructs governmental commitment as collective institutional action. The lexical choices “opportunities,” “job creation,” “skills development,” “education,” “vocational training,” “apprenticeships” and “internships” produce a discourse of empowerment and future orientation. Young people are represented not merely as beneficiaries of government assistance but as citizens being prepared to participate productively in the future economy.

Similarly, the planned expansion of fibre-optic infrastructure is described as “a transformative step toward bridging the digital divide and fostering greater connectivity.” The expression “bridging the digital divide” metaphorically represents unequal access to technology as a gap requiring connection. The administration is thereby associated with modernisation and technological progress. Such representations contribute to the construction of legitimate leadership as forward-looking and responsive to contemporary developmental challenges.

A similar pattern occurs in the statement:

“Our ‘Nigeria First’ policy will further enhance progress as we consolidate market-driven growth.”

The phrase “Nigeria First” functions as a condensed ideological expression. It foregrounds national interest

and constructs governmental policy within a discourse of economic nationalism. The modal “will” projects confidence and future commitment, while “progress” and “growth” provide positive evaluative terms through which the policy is legitimised.

This future orientation is reinforced by the declaration:

“We must learn to produce and grow most of our food, and we are on the path to achieving food sovereignty.”

The modal “must” introduces necessity and collective obligation. Importantly, the statement does not assign responsibility exclusively to the government. The inclusive pronoun “we” constructs food production and national self-sufficiency as collective responsibilities. The metaphor “on the path” continues the journey imagery identified earlier in the speech, representing national development as a process of movement towards a desired destination.

The address also explicitly invites cooperation between the executive and legislature:

“I ask you, the legislature, to join me as we enter the second half of our term to put forth innovative legislation that further encourages industrial development and job creation.”

This passage demonstrates a strategic shift from presidential assertion to institutional collaboration. The pronouns “I,” “you” and “we” construct different but complementary political roles. “I” identifies the President as the initiator of the appeal; “you” recognises the legislature as an independent institutional actor; and “we” subsequently brings both branches together within a shared project. This movement is significant because it represents legitimate leadership not as unilateral control but as the capacity to mobilise cooperation among democratic institutions.

The same discourse appears in the discussion of tax reforms, where the President praises the legislature's “thorough consideration and deliberation” and describes collaboration across party lines as “a model of democratic partnership.” The positive evaluation of institutional cooperation reinforces the speech's broader construction of democracy as dialogue rather than domination. Economic development is thus discursively connected with democratic governance: progress is represented as requiring not only executive action but also cooperation across political and institutional boundaries.

At the level of discursive practice, the speech draws upon familiar developmental discourses of reform, growth, modernisation, productivity, technological advancement and national self-reliance. These discourses are recontextualised within a Democracy Day address, thereby connecting economic performance with democratic legitimacy. The implication is that democracy must produce tangible social and economic benefits if it is to fulfil its promise.

This connection becomes explicit in the assertion:

“As elected leaders, we must continue to do more to make real the dream of Nigeria's political and economic democracy.”

The phrase “make real the dream” acknowledges that democracy remains aspirational and incomplete. By combining “political and economic democracy,” the speech expands the meaning of democratic legitimacy beyond elections and political institutions. Leadership is represented as legitimate not simply because it derives from electoral authority but because it seeks to improve material conditions and broaden economic opportunities.

The wider social significance of this discourse lies in its construction of performance as a basis for political legitimacy. The administration's authority is associated with its capacity to reform the economy,

create opportunities, develop infrastructure and promote national welfare. This complements the historical legitimacy established through democratic memory. The speech therefore advances two interconnected bases of legitimacy: historical continuity with democratic struggle and contemporary competence in governance.

However, this discourse remains ideological because the speech selectively foregrounds indicators and programmes that support a narrative of progress. Through positive lexical choices, statistics and achievement claims, governmental reforms are represented predominantly as successful and necessary. Alternative interpretations, criticisms or negative consequences are largely absent from the official narrative. From a critical discourse perspective, this selectivity is itself significant: political discourse does not merely reflect reality but constructs particular representations of reality that support preferred understandings of leadership and governance.

Overall, the section demonstrates that development functions as an important discourse of legitimation in Tinubu's address. Textually, pronouns, modality, metaphors of healing and movement, positive evaluation and quantitative claims construct the administration as active, competent and future-oriented. At the level of discursive practice, economic and developmental discourses are integrated into the broader commemorative narrative of democracy. At the level of social practice, the speech links political authority with the expectation that democratic leadership should deliver measurable improvements in citizens' lives.

The address, therefore, extends its central construction of legitimate leadership beyond the President's democratic history. Legitimate authority is also represented as productive, collaborative and development-oriented. Through this representation, the speech suggests that the survival and value of democracy depend not only on the preservation of political institutions but also on their capacity to produce national progress.

4.4 Freedom, Tolerance and the Legitimacy of Democratic Authority

A further dimension of the construction of legitimate leadership in Tinubu's address is the representation of freedom, tolerance and respect for dissent as essential principles of democracy. Having invoked democratic history, defended political plurality and presented economic development as evidence of governmental competence, the President also constructs his leadership as compatible with dialogue and the protection of civil liberties. This is particularly evident in his appeal to the legislature:

“We must be vigilant in expanding the political space. We must always value dialogue over dictatorship, persuasion over suppression and rights over might.”

The repetition of “we must” creates a strong sense of collective obligation. The modal verb “must” presents the protection of democratic values not as optional but as necessary. The parallel structure “dialogue over dictatorship, persuasion over suppression and rights over might” creates a series of ideological contrasts. In each pair, the first term is positively associated with democratic practice, while the second represents authoritarianism or the abuse of power.

This contrast is important because it establishes a clear normative definition of democracy. Democracy is constructed through what it accepts—dialogue, persuasion and rights and what it rejects dictatorship, suppression and arbitrary power. The parallelism also gives the statement rhetorical force, making democratic values appear mutually reinforcing rather than isolated principles.

The call to “expand the political space” further represents democracy as an open and evolving system. The metaphor of space suggests room for participation, expression and political difference. Rather than presenting democracy as a fixed institutional arrangement, the speech constructs it as something that must

continually be widened and protected.

The President develops this position through his discussion of criticism:

“Do not be afraid to hear an unkind word spoken against you. Some of the best advice a politician gets sometimes comes from his most ferocious opponents.”

The imperative “Do not be afraid” directly addresses political leaders and encourages tolerance of criticism. The phrase “ferocious opponents” acknowledges the intensity of political disagreement but reinterprets opposition as potentially valuable. Criticism is therefore not represented solely as an attack on authority; it can also become a source of useful advice.

This representation contributes to the construction of a particular model of democratic leadership, one that is expected to tolerate disagreement. The speech thereby positions political authority as compatible with openness to dissent rather than dependent on the silencing of opposing voices.

This argument becomes stronger in the following statement:

“We dare not seek silence because the imposed silence of repressed voices breeds chaos and ill will, not the harmonics of democracy in the long term.”

The expression “dare not” conveys a strong warning against the suppression of dissent. The metaphor of “repressed voices” represents individuals and groups as possessing the right to speak but being prevented from doing so. Silence is described as “imposed,” thereby distinguishing it from voluntary quietness and associating it with repression.

The contrast between “chaos and ill will” and “the harmonics of democracy” is particularly significant. The metaphor “harmonics” draws on the language of music to represent democracy as a condition in which different voices may coexist and produce a meaningful collective order. Democracy, in this construction, does not require the elimination of disagreement. Rather, it depends on the coexistence of diverse and sometimes conflicting voices.

The speech reaches its clearest expression of tolerance in the President's declaration:

“Call me names, call me whatever you will, and I will still call upon democracy to defend your right to do so.”

The repetition of “call me” foregrounds the possibility of personal criticism and gives the statement an emphatic, conversational quality. The use of the first-person pronoun “me” personalises the issue of democratic tolerance. Instead of discussing freedom of expression only in abstract terms, the speaker presents himself as willing to be the object of criticism.

However, the most important element of the statement is the contrast between personal injury and democratic principle. The speaker may be criticised, but his response is not discursively framed as retaliation. Rather, he invokes “democracy” itself as the protector of the critic's right to speak. This construction enables the President to present himself as subject to the principles he publicly endorses.

At the level of discursive practice, this section draws upon wider democratic and constitutional discourses concerning freedom of expression, civil liberties, political opposition and accountable governance. These established democratic values are incorporated into the presidential address and connected with the speaker's own construction of leadership. The discourse thus moves beyond commemorating those who fought against military repression to representing the protection of dissent as a continuing responsibility of democratic governance.

This creates an important connection with the historical narrative established earlier in the speech. The memory of imprisonment, torture, exile and repression during military rule provides the background against which present-day tolerance acquires significance. The earlier victims of repression and the present defence of critical voices become part of the same broader discourse: democracy must not reproduce the authoritarian practices against which its historical heroes struggle.

At the level of social practice, this discourse contributes to the legitimisation of political authority by representing legitimate leadership as self-limiting and tolerant. Political power is not presented as the unrestricted capacity to control others but as authority exercised within democratic boundaries. By publicly accepting criticism and emphasising dialogue, the speaker constructs a moral distinction between democratic leadership and authoritarian rule.

Nevertheless, a critical reading also recognises the ideological nature of this self-representation. The speech presents an ideal image of democratic authority and constructs the administration's position through the values of tolerance, rights and openness. The absence of alternative voices within the address itself means that these values are articulated primarily from the perspective of presidential authority. Thus, the discourse constructs a preferred representation of leadership while leaving the practical contestation of that representation outside the text.

The statement “our nation is not perfect, but it is strong. Our democracy is not invincible, but it is alive” further captures this ideological position. The balanced contrast acknowledges imperfection and vulnerability while preserving an overall positive representation. The repeated structure “not ... but” allows the speaker to recognise limitations without surrendering optimism. Nigeria is represented as imperfect yet strong, while democracy is vulnerable yet alive.

This rhetorical strategy is important to political legitimisation because it avoids presenting the nation or the administration as flawless. Instead, the discourse constructs democratic leadership as a continuing struggle towards improvement. The assertion that the national dream remains “within reach and worth fighting for” returns to the language of collective effort and struggle that runs throughout the address.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that freedom, tolerance and the acceptance of dissent constitute an important dimension of the speech's construction of democratic legitimacy. At the textual level, modality, imperatives, repetition, contrast, metaphor and evaluative language represent democratic leadership as open to dialogue and critical voices. At the level of discursive practice, the speech connects contemporary discussions of civil liberties with Nigeria's historical experience of political repression and democratic resistance. At the level of social practice, these discourses participate in the broader ideological construction of legitimate authority as authority constrained by democratic values.

The section therefore completes the article's central argument. Tinubu's address constructs legitimate leadership through several interconnected discursive resources: historical continuity with the democratic struggle, personal democratic credentials, governmental performance, collective responsibility and tolerance of dissent. Together, these resources transform the Democracy Day address from a ceremonial act of remembrance into a strategic discourse through which political authority is explained, justified and legitimised.

4.5 Discussion of Findings

The analysis across the four sections reveals a coherent pattern in the construction of democracy and legitimate leadership. First, the speech represents democracy as a hard-won historical achievement rooted in the sacrifices of the June 12 struggle and resistance to military rule. Through historical references, metaphors and inclusive pronouns, this memory is transformed into a shared national narrative.

Democratic remembrance therefore serves not merely commemorative purposes but provides a moral foundation for evaluating contemporary political authority.

Second, the address uses personal political biography as a resource for legitimacy. In responding to the one-party-state allegation, Tinubu draws upon his past political experiences to construct himself as a consistent defender of political plurality. The past is consequently recontextualised as evidence for the democratic credibility of present leadership. This demonstrates that political legitimisation in the speech operates through both collective memory and personal historical identity.

Third, the discourse connects legitimate leadership with performance and development. Economic reforms, infrastructure, youth empowerment, food production and institutional cooperation are represented as evidence of competent and purposeful governance. Democracy is therefore constructed as requiring tangible social and economic outcomes. The speech consequently combines historical legitimacy with performance-based legitimacy: leadership is justified both by its connection with democratic ideals and by its claimed capacity to deliver national progress.

Finally, the speech constructs democratic authority through the discourse of freedom, tolerance and dialogue. The repeated preference for dialogue over dictatorship, persuasion over suppression and rights over might establish an ideological contrast between democratic and authoritarian leadership. By representing criticism and dissent as legitimate elements of democratic life, the President further constructs his authority as compatible with political openness.

Viewed through Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model, these findings demonstrate the close relationship among textual choices, discursive practice and social practice. At the textual level, pronouns, modality, metaphor, repetition, contrast and evaluative language construct particular representations of democracy and leadership. At the level of discursive practice, the speech recontextualises democratic history, the June 12 struggle, personal political experience and developmental discourse. At the level of social practice, these discursive choices participate in broader struggles over political legitimacy, power, national identity and the meaning of democracy in Nigeria.

The principal finding of the study is, therefore, that democratic memory functions as a major resource for the legitimisation of contemporary political leadership. The address constructs a symbolic continuity between past sacrifice and present authority. However, this legitimacy is reinforced by two additional discourses: the promise of developmental performance and the public endorsement of democratic tolerance. The resulting representation of leadership is thus historically grounded, performance-oriented and normatively democratic.

More broadly, the findings suggest that Nigerian presidential political discourse operates as a site where history and contemporary politics are strategically connected. National commemorations such as Democracy Day provide political leaders with opportunities not only to remember the past but also to interpret its significance for present governance. In this sense, commemoration becomes a form of political action: the past is selectively recalled, given contemporary meaning and mobilised in the construction of present legitimacy.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has examined President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's 2025 Democracy Day Address as a discourse through which democracy, political legitimacy and leadership are constructed and negotiated. Using Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, the study analysed the relationship among the linguistic features of the address, the historical and political discourses it draws upon, and the wider socio-political context within which it operates.

The findings show that the speech constructs democracy primarily as a hard-won, collective and unfinished national project. Through references to military rule, the June 12 struggle and the sacrifices of pro-democracy actors, the address recontextualises Nigeria's democratic past and transforms it into a shared national memory. This historical memory performs an important legitimating function by establishing a symbolic connection between past democratic sacrifice and present political authority.

The study further shows that Tinubu draws upon his personal political history to construct himself as a leader with established democratic credentials. His rejection of a one-party state is supported by references to his earlier political resistance and participation in opposition politics. In this way, personal biography becomes intertwined with collective democratic memory, enabling present leadership to be represented as consistent with a longer history of commitment to political plurality.

In addition, the address constructs legitimate leadership through the discourse of performance and development. Economic reform, infrastructure, youth empowerment, technological advancement and food security are represented as evidence of purposeful governance. The speech consequently extends democratic legitimacy beyond electoral authority and historical credentials by associating leadership with the capacity to produce social and economic progress.

The discourse of freedom, tolerance and dialogue provides a further basis for the legitimacy of authority. Through contrasts between dialogue and dictatorship, persuasion and suppression, and rights and might, the address constructs democratic leadership as authority that recognises the legitimacy of criticism and political difference. Although these representations constitute the President's preferred construction of his leadership, they nevertheless demonstrate how democratic values can be strategically mobilised to define the moral boundaries of legitimate political power.

Viewed through Fairclough's model, the study demonstrates that these meanings emerge from the interaction among text, discursive practice and social practice. At the textual level, pronouns, modality, metaphor, repetition, contrast and evaluative language construct positive representations of democracy and leadership. At the level of discursive practice, the address recontextualises the June 12 struggle, military repression, democratic resistance, personal political history and developmental discourse. At the level of social practice, these representations participate in broader ideological negotiations concerning political power, national identity, democratic governance and legitimacy in Nigeria.

The major contribution of the article lies in its demonstration that commemorative presidential discourse can function simultaneously as an act of remembrance and a strategy of political legitimation. Tinubu's Democracy Day Address does not merely recall Nigeria's democratic past; it selectively interprets and mobilises that past to establish continuity between historical sacrifice and contemporary leadership. Democratic memory thus becomes a significant discursive resource through which political authority is presented as historically grounded, democratically committed and development-oriented.

More broadly, the study suggests that national commemorations deserve greater attention in the study of political discourse. Such occasions provide important opportunities for political leaders to connect collective memory with present political realities and future national aspirations. Further studies may, therefore, examine other Nigerian commemorative presidential speeches comparatively to investigate how different leaders mobilise historical memory, national identity and democratic values in the continuing construction and contestation of political legitimacy.

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