

Metaphorical framing of DEMOCRACY

How Nigerian military dictators and civilian leaders talk to gain legitimacy

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Military dictatorships are inherently undemocratic, yet military leaders often frame DEMOCRACY metaphorically. This raises critical questions: why do they do this, and how do their framings differ from civilian leaders? Existing studies on democratic conception provide limited answers. Addressing this paradox, this study employs mapping principle and discourse-conceptual analysis to examine the metaphorical contestation of DEMOCRACY in Nigerian political discourse (NPD). Using a corpus of 338 speeches by military heads of state and civilian presidents (1960–2023), the analysis reveals metaphors as tools for legitimation and pre-legitimation. Six dominant source domains (SDs), JOURNEY, BUILDING, PERSON, PLANT, MACHINE, and WAR, emerged across both groups, but with notable differences. Military leaders favoured JOURNEY and PLANT, while civilian leaders preferred BUILDING and WAR. Mapping principle analysis highlights how JOURNEY and BUILDING metaphors create divergent argumentative frames, functioning as strategies of rationalisation, pre-legitimation, and conceptual flip-siding, reinforcing a hegemonic, elite-controlled conception of democracy.

Keywords: democracy, mapping principles, discourse-conceptual analysis, metaphor, military discourse, civilian discourse, legitimation, pre-legitimation, conceptual flip-siding, Nigerian political discourse

1. Introduction

The idea of DEMOCRACY is constantly contested, with diverse political traditions and movements struggling to imbue it with hegemonic meanings as the normative and desirable conception (Carpentier and Wimmer 2025; Gallie 1968). Yet, in Ernesto Laclau's view, DEMOCRACY is a floating or empty signifier fully detached from any fixed signified or reference (Laclau 2007 36–46; cf. Carpentier 2021).

The meaning of DEMOCRACY, Laclau notes, is (re)constructed and negotiated in discourse (1988, 54). This stance points to the fact that DEMOCRACY is inherently unstable. It struggles between political and ideological movements that want to consolidate and expand DEMOCRACY through different social practices and movements that want to inhibit, repeal, and even destroy democratic practices (Carpentier and Wimmer 2025). Nigerian political discourse (NPD) arguably occupies a middle ground.

Nigeria has been governed by two political cultures, military dictatorship and civilian government, since 1960. The military dictatorships were led by nine army generals at various times, while the country has experienced four distinct republics under civilian governments. According to Odinkalu (2001), except for brief periods from 1 October 1960 to 15 January 1966 and from 1 October 1979 to 31 December 1983, Nigeria's political leadership before 1999 was predominantly military based. Historical accounts illustrate the challenges faced in the quest for DEMOCRACY, persistently undermined by military incursions (Lewis 1994). However, scholars such as Ashindorbe and Danjibo (2022) assert that 29 May 1999 marked a new era in Nigeria, initiating a liberal democratic dispensation that has lasted for 25 years.

The period of military rule has been argued to obliterate the fundamentals of DEMOCRACY, instituting autocracy and high-handedness (Yagboyaju and Akinola 2019). Military governance is often regarded as an "aberration to democracy" (Alonge 2005 205). Onwutuebe (2022, 6) reinforces this view, stating that military rule undermines democratic principles, failing to embrace DEMOCRACY as an inclusive political process. Despite this, both military and civilian regimes centralise DEMOCRACY in their legitimacy quest, evident in their discourses. Military leaders have at times justified the overthrow of elected governments on the grounds of civilian leaders' undemocratic practices (see Chigbu et al. 2025).

This paradoxical use of democratic language by authoritarian actors is the central puzzle of this study. We argue that this phenomenon is a prime example of what has been termed conceptual flip-siding: the strategic reversal of notions closely associated with liberal democracy for pronouncedly illiberal or authoritarian gains (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024). Moreover, while military rule is often condemned for its antithetical stance towards DEMOCRACY, characterised by the suspension of constitutional rights, military discourses frequently involve the (re)construction of democratic ideals, similar to their civilian counterparts.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how DEMOCRACY is framed by political leaders to the populace, as such framing may influence citizens' perceptions of DEMOCRACY and the political institutions governing them. While previous research has focused on the discursive framing of DEMOCRACY in the media (e.g., Garcia-Blanco 2009) and in political rhetoric in Europe (e.g., Alekseev 2024),

there is limited understanding of how African leaders, both military and civilian, reshape their discourses on DEMOCRACY in relation to their (un)constitutional status and quest for legitimacy. Thus, this study investigates how Nigerian military and civilian leaders metaphorically frame DEMOCRACY in their speeches, exploring how these framings hegemonise democratic meanings and legitimise their leadership. This study employs a conceptual mapping model, specifically the Mapping Principle Analysis (Ahrens 2010; Zeng and Ahrens 2023), alongside the Discourse-Conceptual Analysis (DCA) framework (Krzyżanowski 2010, 2019), to examine how Nigerian military and civilian leaders metaphorically frame DEMOCRACY in their speeches. It explores how these framings hegemonise democratic meanings and legitimise leadership through strategies of rationalisation (Reyes 2011), pre-legitimation (Krzyżanowski 2014), and conceptual flip-siding (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024).

2. A critical-conceptual perspective on legitimacy, democracy, and metaphor

Research on the legitimacy of the democratic nation-state can be categorised into two primary foci: the *acceptability* and *factual acceptance* of democratic order. Studies centred on acceptability are predominantly diagnostic and prescriptive; they assess the acceptability of democracy in terms of the quality of real-world political order (Schneider 2008; Lauth 2004). These studies conceive legitimacy as a normative attribute of political structures and prescribe the conditions under which governance is deemed legitimate. Conversely, the second focus, which is primarily empirical and descriptive, measures the factual acceptance of democratic order among citizens (Steffek 2003). Here, legitimacy is perceived as regime support, with empirical research elucidating why individuals under a democratic regime accept and endorse it. Within this empirical strand, fundamental concerns include the measurement of support levels, comparative analyses across different contexts, and the stability of the democratic order (Schneider 2008). Additional questions arise regarding why a regime is considered legitimate, the sources of legitimacy beliefs, and the criteria for their assessment. These studies benefit significantly from public surveys and observations of (un)conventional political actions (Schneider 2008; cf. Dahlberg and Mörkenstam 2024).

However, survey-based approaches have faced criticism for being reactive and context-insensitive (Schneider 2008). Relying on prompted stimuli through closed questions, these methods often fail to capture the evaluative criteria that respondents prioritise. Furthermore, surveys may overlook the provenance, meaning, and implications of legitimacy beliefs (Barker 2001). Consequently,

both approaches appear ill-equipped to comprehensively capture the dynamics of legitimation processes, including the strategies, practices, and actors involved (Schneider 2008). This situation has given rise to a third set of inquiries concerning which strategies, practices, and actors are significant in the production, transformation, crisis, and restoration of legitimacy within a democratic order. Here, the mechanisms and processes of legitimation take centre stage. Importantly, this set of questions does not assert causation; rather, it highlights communication as a critical dimension of legitimacy (cf. Zappettini and Bennett 2022). Renowned CDS scholar, Van Leeuwen, alongside colleagues, (e.g., Van Leeuwen 2007; Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999) and other scholars (e.g., Reyes 2011; Vaara 2014), have consistently advanced this discursive aspect of legitimation, developing various strategies such as authorisation, rationalisation, mythopoesis, moral panics, normalisation. However, the nuanced use of figurative language, particularly metaphor, in gaining legitimacy in democratic discourse have not received adequate attention.

This study builds on this discursive understanding of legitimation by integrating several key concepts from contemporary critical discourse studies. First, we incorporate the work of Antonio Reyes (2011, 2020), who highlights how legitimation is often achieved through rationality/rationalisation, presenting actions as logical, necessary, or simply as “the way things are” (see Van Leeuwen 2007, 103). Reyes (2020) shows how political actors and media can normalise extreme actions, such as police intervention against voters, by discursively framing them as the only “normal” or “democratic” option available. This provides a powerful lens for understanding how Nigerian military leaders might justify anti-democratic actions by framing them as rational and unavoidable steps to restore order.

Furthermore, the legitimation of political rule, especially by regimes with contested authority, often relies not just on justifying past actions but on legitimising future ones. This is the process of pre-legitimation (Krzyżanowski 2014), which involves constructing “imaginaries” of the future to justify present-day actions. Because metaphors are inherently suited to creating such imaginaries (Krzyżanowski 2019), they become a primary tool for pre-legitimation. For instance, by framing democracy as a future “destination” on a JOURNEY, a military leader can pre-legitimise their continued hold on power as a necessary part of the travel plan. This is distinct from post-factual legitimation, which seeks to justify events that have already occurred.

Perhaps most critically for this study is the strategy of conceptual flip-siding, defined as the “strategic reversal of notions once closely associated with liberal democracy... for the pronouncedly illiberal gains” (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024, 34). This process allows illiberal and authoritarian actors to appropriate the language of democracy, emptying concepts of their original

meaning and infusing them with new, often contradictory, ideological content. When a military dictator claims to be “laying the foundation for democracy,” they are engaging in conceptual flip-siding, using the positive connotations of democratic language to legitimise an inherently undemocratic power structure. This creates a “conceptual ‘doublethink’” (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024, 34) where the term DEMOCRACY can simultaneously hold both liberal and illiberal meanings in public discourse.

This study contends that metaphor serves as a vital resource in the (re)production of legitimacy, often acting as the primary vehicle for rationalisation, pre-legitimation, and conceptual flip-siding. The focus on the metaphorical framing of DEMOCRACY is rooted in metaphor’s critical role in constructing coherent understandings of reality (Charteris-Black 2004:28). The contestation surrounding the dominant signification of DEMOCRACY is inherently ideological, as it seeks to de/legitimise DEMOCRACY, its actors, events, institutions, and practices. From the perspective of Hodge and Kress (1993), ideology presents a systematically organised representation of reality. Consequently, Chilton and Lakoff (1995) argue that metaphors are ideological because they “define in significant part what one takes as reality” (56). Furthermore, Chilton (1996) posits that the use of metaphors can “privilege one understanding of reality over others.” This argument is reinforced by Schneider’s assertion that metaphors perform cognitive functions i.e., they simplify or condense reality and can also obscure or highlight particular aspects of it. The potential of metaphors for diagnostic framing and consensus building in relation to legitimacy (Snow and Benford 1989) is particularly salient.

We base our operationalisation of legitimacy largely on institutional theory (Deegan 2002) and critical discourse studies (CDS) (Van Dijk 1998). Thus, the understanding of legitimacy within democracy or any institution can be discerned from both organisational and social contract perspectives. DEMOCRACY within a nation-state resembles a social contract between political leaders and citizens, embodying a model of governance (cf. Deegan 2002; Mathews 1993). Therefore, a democratic nation and its governing institutions exist to the extent that they can establish legitimacy and are regarded as legitimate or binding by the citizenry (Weber 1978). Establishing legitimacy also involves instituting positive, normative, beneficial, ethical, humanistic, and rightful practices for a particular idea, action, institution, or entity (Vaara 2014; Van Dijk 1998; Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999).

Nigerian leaders, particularly within the military, are continually assessed by citizens and both local and international bodies regarding their democratic legitimacy (Chigbu et al. 2025). Nevertheless, these leaders contest and construct legitimacy by making DEMOCRACY a prominent theme in their discourse. This paper

argues that the framing and emphasis placed on democratic issues may drive a dominant signification that advances positive self-representation. Furthermore, framing DEMOCRACY using metaphor may solidify inherent interpretations, causal attributions, and normative orientations regarding the core dimensions of democratic order (Schneider 2008; see Dahl 1989), thereby creating or precluding possibilities for acceptance or protest. In the following section, we will review existing linguistic studies that explore metaphors of DEMOCRACY.

2.1 Metaphors of DEMOCRACY

Some studies have explored how metaphors frame or conceptualise DEMOCRACY (e.g., Ahrens and Zeng 2021; Baş 2020; Inya 2022; Kövecses 1994; Heidt 2013; Hsu et al. 2022). These works focus on the discourses of political leaders and their actions, revealing that politicians, editors, and writers use metaphors to shape perceptions of DEMOCRACY. For instance, Kövecses (1994) analysed Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, uncovering the dominant metaphor DEMOCRACY IS A (PASSIONATE) PERSON, which critiques American democracy as highly defective. Conversely, Heidt (2013) examined former US President Ronald Reagan's discourse, identifying metaphors such as "LIGHT/DARK, SEA, and DISEASE." Heidt argued that these metaphors position the US as a hub for promoting DEMOCRACY and solving global issues. The differing findings of these studies likely stem from the distinct genres and time periods of their data, with Tocqueville predating Reagan by over a century. While both methodologies could be improved, the identified metaphors reflect varying perceptions of DEMOCRACY in their contexts. Heidt's study suggests that analysing Nigerian political leaders' speeches may yield valuable insights into their perspectives on DEMOCRACY.

Furthermore, the examination of variations in the metaphorical framing of DEMOCRACY was central to the studies by Ahrens and Zeng (2021), and Baş (2020). Ahrens and Zeng analysed news editorials from Beijing, Hong Kong, and Taipei, finding that DEMOCRACY is framed as a "LIVING BEING," "PHYSICAL OBJECT," "COMPETITION," "BUILDING," and "JOURNEY," with significant differences in preferred metaphorical structures among the cities. Baş compared the metaphors employed by Turkish and American speakers, utilising concordance lines from the TS Column, TNCv3.0, COCA, and NOW. She concluded that DEMOCRACY is conceptualised as a DESTINATION in Turkish and as WAR in American English. Some metaphorical structures identified by Baş differed from those of Ahrens and Zeng (2021), highlighting cultural and linguistic variations in framing DEMOCRACY. These studies provide essential context for the present study. Given the differences in data, it is important to investigate whether the speeches of African political

leaders exhibit similar framing and mapping principles of DEMOCRACY as those found in Asia or the West.

Additionally, the works of Hsu et al. (2022) and Inya (2022) intersect with this study by examining rhetoric. Hsu et al. (2022) explored metaphorical expressions related to DEMOCRACY in Taiwanese presidential inaugural addresses, finding that DEMOCRACY is framed using the following source domains (SDs): BUILDING, JOURNEY, WAR, ORGANISM, METAL, WAVE, and EXPERIMENT. Inya (2022) investigated the Nigerian Senate debates and identified different metaphorical scenarios for DEMOCRACY, including “ERECT STRUCTURE,” “LIVING ORGANISM,” and “DIVIDENDS.” While both studies provide a foundational understanding of DEMOCRACY, this research will explore how DEMOCRACY is framed across two political cultures to determine if the framing shares similar ideological and legitimization functions.

Ultimately, much of our understanding of the metaphorical framing and conceptualisation of DEMOCRACY is derived primarily from the Global North and from Asia in the Global South. Insights into the metaphorical framing of DEMOCRACY in Africa are underrepresented in the literature. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by exploring these research questions.

1. What metaphor source domains (SDs) are used in framing DEMOCRACY in Nigerian political discourse (NPD), and what is their distributional pattern?
Sub-RQ1: Is there any association between comparable metaphor SDs and political cultures (military and civilian)?
2. What are the mapping principles (MPs) of the dominant metaphor SDs used in conceptualising DEMOCRACY?
Sub-RQ1: What legitimization functions are advanced using the dominant metaphors across the two corpora?

3. Methodology

In this section we will detail the research design of the study. We first explain how the corpus was constructed, before moving to an explanation of how metaphors were identified and coded. Lastly, we introduce our analytical framework, which combines discourse-conceptual analysis with legitimization.

3.1 Corpus creation

To address the research questions, this study constructs a corpus of 338 Nigerian presidential speeches delivered by military heads of state and civilian presidents

from 1960 to 2023, encompassing 63 years of Nigeria’s political history since independence. The corpus is divided into two main sub-corpora: the military corpus (MIL; 431,942-word count), which includes speeches from military leaders, and the civilian corpus (CIV; 421,384-word count), comprising speeches from elected civilian presidents. The speeches were sourced from the National Archives of Nigeria, the National Library, and selected national dailies. After sorting the data, 13 speeches were excluded for not meeting the selection criteria, which required that each speech be a full text addressing politico-economic issues and DEMOCRACY.

The language of the corpus is Standard Nigerian English (SNE), as all speeches are delivered in English. English has served as the official language and lingua franca in Nigeria since the colonial era, making it the primary medium for political leadership and governance. Consequently, it effectively reaches the broader populace. The corpus is composed in a written-to-be-spoken and/or spoken mode. The military and civilian regimes represent two distinct political cultures, in line with Alexander’s (2000) typology, that have shaped Nigeria’s post-colonial political history from 1960 to 2023. The compositions of the corpus of Nigerian political speeches can be accessed at Open Science Framework (OSF), <https://osf.io/p84kb/>.

3.2 Metaphor identification procedure

This sub-section details concisely the procedure for metaphor identification, source domain verification and the mapping principle analysis. This study adopted a top-down approach to manually identify metaphors within the corpora. Following Metaphor Pattern Analysis (Stefanowitsch 2006), we searched for the target domain DEMOCRACY using the keywords “democracy,” “civil,” and “republic.” The latter two were chosen for their frequent use by Nigerian leaders to denote democratic rule. This search yielded 1,515 and 1,763 concordances for the military and civilian corpora, respectively. After excluding instances where keywords were used as proper nouns (e.g., “Federal Republic of Nigeria”) or referred to other concepts (e.g., “civil service”), potential metaphors were identified following the MIPVUXS framework (Steen et al. 2010).

To classify these linguistic metaphors into conceptual source domains (SDs), we used the Source Domain Verification Procedure (Ahrens and Jiang 2020). An SD is a concrete concept (e.g., WAR) used to understand an abstract one (DEMOCRACY). This corpus-assisted procedure employs linguistic tools, primarily WordNet and the Suggested Upper Merged Ontology (SUMO), to assign a metaphorical keyword to an SD category. The classification relies on analysing the keyword’s semantic properties, senses, and collocational frequency patterns,

ensuring a systematic and verifiable approach to determining the final source domains.

Typically, a metaphor's SD is a more concrete conceptual domain that is used to comprehend a more abstract target domain (TD) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003). For example, in the statement "Buhari *fight*s *enemies* of democracy," the abstract target domain DEMOCRACY is framed within the concrete source domain WAR realised linguistically with *fight* and *enemies*. To determine which SDs a linguistic metaphor belongs to, the researchers adopted Ahrens and Jiang (2020) Source Domain Verification Procedure. The verification procedure is a corpus-assisted approach that is carried out with the employment of corpus linguistics tools, namely, WordNet, SUMO (Suggested Upper Merged Ontology), an online dictionary, and collocation frequency patterns. We rely mainly on SUMO nodes and sense, WordNet senses and synonyms to classify a potential metaphorical keyword into an SD category. We also ensured for coding reliability.¹

Given that this study is corpus-assisted; to establish the ideological/legitimation function of a conceptual metaphor without the cherry-picking sometimes associated with CDS, we follow the Mapping Principle (MP) analysis proposed in Ahrens (2010) conceptual mapping model (CMM). The MP is the underlying reason, or dominant frame, focus, or theme for a source-target domains pairing. While Lakoff (1993) argues that this principle is not precisely defined, relying on conceptual understanding, Ahrens' (2010) CMM rather proposes that MPs can be identified systematically by analysing patterns and frequencies in source-target mappings within a corpus.

In this model, MPs are identified by examining the linguistic evidence and frequency of mappings. The most frequently occurring lexical item(s) in a source-target domain pairing is considered as the MP. Ahrens (2010) emphasises the importance of linguistic correspondences in identifying these lexical patterns. For instance, in the metaphor IDEA IS A BUILDING, aspects like "foundation" and "stability" are mapped to highlight the structural nature of ideas, reflecting the abstract similarities between ideas and physical buildings (Ahrens 2010, 10). This approach aligns with Kövecses' (2017, 344) concept of "main meaning foci" and provides an empirical basis for identifying the dominant argumentative frames, or topoi, that underpin the metaphors in our corpus.

1. The reliability of the metaphor identification and source domains verification was determined through peer review discussions and member checking in series of meetings with the Metaphor and Creativity Lab, PolyU.

3.3 Discourse-conceptual analysis and legitimation

In line with our theoretical framework, the analysis extends beyond metaphor identification and mapping. Drawing insights from Discourse-Conceptual Analysis (DCA) (Krzyżanowski 2010, 2016, 2019), this final analytical stage connects the identified metaphorical patterns to their function as legitimation strategies. This allows us to deconstruct how the concept of DEMOCRACY is ideologically contested and used for political gain. Specifically, this study will:

1. Identify the dominant metaphor source domains and their mapping principles (MPs) to uncover their underlying metaphorical/argumentative frames.
2. Examine how these metaphorical/argumentative frames function as legitimation strategies, with a particular focus on rationalisation (Reyes 2011), pre-legitimation of future political actions through imaginaries (Krzyżanowski 2014), and potential instances of conceptual flip-siding, where the language of democracy is reversed for illiberal ends (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024).

This DCA layer ensures the analysis moves from describing metaphorical patterns to explaining how they are strategically deployed to construct, contest, and secure political legitimacy.

4. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings, integrating the analysis of metaphors with the discourse-conceptual and legitimation frameworks. Section 4.1 addresses RQ1 (i.e., metaphor source domains (SDs) used in framing DEMOCRACY in NPD, and their distributional pattern) while Sections 4.2 and 4.3 are about the mapping principles (MPs) and legitimation roles of the JOURNEY and BUILDING metaphors used in framing DEMOCRACY (RQ2). The MPs, stated in Sections 4.2 and 4.3, are mainly postulated based on the most frequently occurring keyword(s) of the SDs. Following previous research (Zeng and Ahrens 2023), 50% cumulative percentage of the metaphorical pattern of an SD is set as the threshold for the postulation of the MP. The rationale for the set cut-off is to accommodate adequate representative keywords for interpretable discussion. The tables of most frequently occurring keywords for each JOURNEY and BUILDING in MIL and CIV, discussed in Sections 4.2 and 4.3, can be accessed at OSF <https://osf.io/p84kb/>.

4.1 RQ1: What metaphor source domains (SDs) are used in framing DEMOCRACY in NPD, and what is their distributional pattern?

The first research question centres on the metaphor SDs used in framing DEMOCRACY in the NPD and associated distribution patterns including differences in the metaphor type-token ratio (MTTR). In the speeches of Nigerian politicians delivered between 1960 and 2023, fifteen SDs were identified in military corpus and eighteen in the civilian corpus. In line with previous studies (e.g., Ahrens and Zeng 2021), 95% cumulative percentage is set as the cut-off point for determining dominant SDs in the corpus. With this criterion, seven SDs, namely, JOURNEY (168), BUILDING (124), PERSON (52), PLANT (28), MACHINE (25), WAR (12), and EXPERIMENT (12), accounted as the most frequently used SDs in MIL, while nine SDs, BUILDING (194), PERSON (119), JOURNEY (101), BUSINESS (44), WAR (37), MACHINE (36), PLANT (19), COMPETITON (13), and PHYSICAL SPACE (12), accounted as most frequently used in civilian corpus. The full token frequency distribution patterns for both corpora, along with normalised ratios and type-token ratios, can be accessed at OSF <https://osf.io/p84kb/>.

Among these SDs, six domains are used comparably in the military and civilian corpora. However, EXPERIMENT is exclusive to the military leaders while BUSINESS, COMPETITION and PHYSICAL SPACE are solely relied on by the civilian leaders. On whether there is difference in the type-token ratios of the SDs between military and civilian, the total ratio percentage show that military has higher metaphor type-token ratio (MTTR) of 35.87% over civilian's 29.22%. The MTTR is obtained by dividing the frequency of the metaphor type with the metaphor tokens (see Brezina 2018 for discussion on type-token ratio). The ratio is multiplied by 100 to express in percentage. A high MTTR indicates a high degree of metaphorical diversity, whereas a low MMTR indicates otherwise. According to Thomas (2005), type-token ration could range from 0 to 1. With slightly equivalent corpora size, the total type-token ratio percentage suggest that military leaders rely more on unique metaphorical language to express their thoughts or experiences than their civilian counterparts.

4.1.1 *Is there any association between metaphor SDs and political cultures (military and civilian)?*

A closer attention is paid to the first six comparable source domains, JOURNEY, BUILDING, PERSON, PLANT, MACHINE, WAR, in both corpora that the two set of political leaders rely on to frame DEMOCRACY to reveal significant differences in the usage. The Chi-square results $\chi^2(12, N=905) = 73.765, p < .001$ show that significant association exist in the use of SDs between the political cultures, (military and civilian). Examining the adjusted residuals (residual ± 2.0) results, military

leaders significantly used more keywords in JOURNEY (7.2) and PLANT (2.2) SDs than would be expected by chance in framing DEMOCRACY. Conversely, negative adjusted residuals are observed for BUILDING (-2.3), PERSON (-5.1), and WAR (-2.8). These negative residuals indicate the military used fewer keywords than expected in these SDs. The full cross-tabulation of political cultures and SDs can be accessed at <https://osf.io/p84kb/>.

In the civilian corpus, the political leaders used more frequently keywords from BUILDING (2.3), PERSON (5.1), and WAR (2.8) than would be expected by chance. In contrast, negative residuals are observed for JOURNEY (-7.2), and PLANT (-2.2), which show that the leaders used fewer keywords than would be expected by chance in framing DEMOCRACY. The adjusted residuals for the MACHINE SD in both the military (-0.5) and civilian (0.5) points to a non-significant deviation as both leaders used the SD relatively similarly as would be anticipated by chance alone. In other words, there may not be a significant difference in the use of the MACHINE SD between military and civilian leaders when it comes to framing DEMOCRACY.

In sum, the results above suggest that framing of DEMOCRACY is critical for Nigerian political leaders. This is true given the preponderance of SDs used by the military and civilian leaders to frame DEMOCRACY. Also, the Chi-square tests revealed that there is a significant association between political cultures and SDs. As a result, some SDs are used by military and civilian leaders significantly more or less frequently than would be anticipated by chance.

4.2 DEMOCRACY IS A JOURNEY: Pre-legitimising Authoritarianism and Legitimising Arrival

The JOURNEY metaphor is a powerful conceptual tool in political discourse, particularly within the context of Nigerian DEMOCRACY. This metaphor transcends mere rhetorical flourish; it frames political and economic issues in ways that resonate deeply with audiences, enabling politicians to articulate their agendas effectively (Cibulskien 2012; Dávid and Furkó 2015). By employing the JOURNEY metaphor, leaders create a symbolic connection between the trajectory of a journey and significant political events, thereby mapping the characteristics of a journey onto their political narratives. As Charteris-Black (2011) notes, these characteristics, comprising both essential and optional elements, endow the JOURNEY metaphor with its persuasive potency, facilitating inference and evaluation.

In the Nigerian context, the JOURNEY metaphor is notably prevalent among military leaders, accounting for 39.90% of the dominant SDs in military discourse, compared to 17.56% in civilian discourse. This disparity underscores the meta-

phor's role in legitimising different forms of leadership, while simultaneously shaping public perceptions of DEMOCRACY.

Now, when we examine the MP of the conceptual metaphor "DEMOCRACY IS A JOURNEY", it reveals distinct legitimization frameworks within MIL and CIV, both of which hinge on the notion of *return* following the most frequent keyword in the data (see Tables 5 and 6, accessible at <https://osf.io/p84kb/>). In MIL, DEMOCRACY IS A JOURNEY: *in that travellers who are on a journey are expected to return to their original starting point, reflecting a desire for Nigeria's political leadership, initiated post-independence in 1960, to revert to its democratic roots.*

On the contrary, DEMOCRACY IS A JOURNEY in CIV: *because travellers have successfully completed their journey upon arriving at their destination.* Here, Nigeria's political governance, which initially embraced democratic principles, is perceived as having returned to a state of democracy following the military-to-civilian transition on May 29, 1999.

While both military and civilian discourses hinge on the idea of *return* in a JOURNEY, their underlying ideological motivations diverge significantly. On the surface, JOURNEY metaphors may present a linear or cyclical view of political development in Nigeria, offering citizens three critical perspectives: departure, motion, and arrival, encapsulated in the schema, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL. Yet, at a deeper level, the JOURNEY metaphor serves more profound ideological/legitimation functions. The mapping principle, hinging mainly on the most frequent keyword "return", serves as the foundation for several powerful legitimization strategies.²

- (1) I therefore wish to state categorically here that the Federal Military Government is committed to the creation of more states in the country before the **return** to *civilian rule*. Further pronouncement will be made on the matter in due course. (General Gowon, October 1, 1974. MIL)
- (2) We are all witnesses to the difficult and tortuous **route** we were forced to take in order to produce the Presidential flagbearers to participate in the election. These are clear indications of the difficult **road** to *democracy* and our determination to get there in spite of obstacles. (General Ibrahim Babangida, August 17, 1993. MIL)
- (3) This Administration is resolved to ensure that our people's aspiration for a **speedy** but **sure-footed return** to *democracy* is neither denied nor delayed (General Abdulsalami Abubakar, July 20, 1998. MIL)

2. See Appendix 1 for list of speeches referenced in this paper.

For military leaders, the metaphor performs a crucial pre-legitimation function (Krzyżanowski 2014). By constructing an imaginary of a future democratic “destination,” it legitimises the military’s current, undemocratic actions as a necessary, temporary phase on the path to get there. This is a classic case of conceptual flip-siding (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2024): the anti-democratic act of a coup is discursively reversed and framed as a pro-democratic necessity to ensure a “return” to the correct path. This framing serves to rationalise authoritarian practices as procedural necessities (Reyes 2011; Van Leeuwen 2007). By promising an eventual “return,” military regimes can justify the suspension of constitutional rights, censorship, and the suppression of dissent as unavoidable steps on the “difficult road to democracy.” The JOURNEY metaphor creates a narrative where the military are the pilots navigating a treacherous path, and citizens are passengers who must trust their leadership.

The implications of this metaphor are critically profound, especially considering Nigeria’s historical context of military coups. Between 1966 and 1999, the country experienced nine coups d’état, with seven proving successful. Military leaders deployed the JOURNEY metaphor to legitimise coups as necessary “departures” to “return” Nigeria to its democratic “starting point” (see Example 1; Gen Gowon 1974). This rhetoric frames military rule as a transitional phase, akin to a pilot guiding a wayward nation back to its “rightful path” (Example 2; Gen. Babangida 1993). The framing serves to (pre)legitimise military rule, portraying it as a temporary measure vital for national stability.

Still, the repeated use of JOURNEY metaphors also reveals an inherent contradiction. While military leaders assert that their rule is a short-term intervention, the reality often belies these claims. Studies indicate that military regimes frequently promise a return to civilian rule to quell domestic and international dissent (Yukawa 2023). Such promises, whether genuine or not, are often bolstered by JOURNEY metaphors (Chigbu et al. 2025), which create the illusion that the military’s governance is a mere detour on the road to DEMOCRACY. For instance, General Gowon’s assertion that the transition to civilian rule would occur after the creation of new states illustrates this manipulation. This statement, made during the ninth year of Gowon’s extended military dictatorship, conditions public expectation for an imminent arrival while simultaneously would have prolonged his leadership tenure. Nonetheless, the creation of new states is framed within the JOURNEY metaphor as a necessary waypoint on the path to DEMOCRACY. By positioning state creation as a vital step, military leaders like Gowon suggest that the JOURNEY towards a more stable and representative democratic framework requires structural adjustments that reflect the nation’s diverse ethnic and regional identities. This framing aligns with procedural understanding of DEMOCRACY (Dahl 1989; Dahlberg and Mörkenstam 2024), particularly, the decentralisation of

power relations (Carpentier and Wimmer 2025). Also, it can be seen as an attempt to address historical grievances and promote inclusivity, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of both the military regime and the future civilian government.

General Babangida's assertion (in Example 2) that "We are all witnesses to the difficult and tortuous route we were forced to take..." illustrates the use of the JOURNEY metaphor to create a sense of shared purpose between the military and the populace. This metaphor is contextualised after annulment of the 1993 presidential election of which Chief MKO Abiola won. This language not only legitimises military disruption of democratic election but conceptually *flipsides* a narrative of unity, suggesting that the citizens and military are engaged in a collective struggle towards a common goal despite the latter annulling an election. This conceptual flip-siding achieved with the JOURNEY metaphor may be crucial for authoritarianism, which is illegitimate and illiberal. Furthermore, the metaphor rationalises the subversion of an election outcome as a mere obstacle on the collective "journey," thereby obscuring the military's role as the agent of disruption and repositioning it as a reluctant but necessary guide. Such conceptual flip-siding could mitigate public dissent and garner support for their regimes.

JOURNEY metaphor facilitates procedural legitimation. By emphasising temporal transitions ("speedy return to democracy" – Example 3 General Abubakar 1998), the military aligns with Linz's (2000) theory of authoritarianism as a "temporary corrective." Nonetheless, this framing reconstructs authoritarian practices (e.g., censorship, coups, suspension of the constitution) as procedural necessities.

Civilian leaders (mainly, 1999–present) on the other hand employ the JOURNEY metaphor to signify "arrival" at DEMOCRACY (Examples 4, Presidents Obasanjo 1999, and 5, Buhari 2017). This framing emphasises completed transitions ("return to democratic governance") and institutional continuity, yet may obscure persistent deficits. Moreover, there is a dual role of DEMOCRACY within the JOURNEY metaphor which serves to reinforce the legitimacy of civilian governance, suggesting a collective return to foundational democratic principles that resonate with the populace. By framing their narratives in this way, civilian leaders effectively invoke a sense of progress and continuity in Nigeria's political landscape.

- (4) I warmly welcome you to this inaugural meeting of the Council of State, the first since the **return** to **democratic governance**.
(President Olusegun Obasanjo, June 29, 1999. CIV)
- (5) We should remind ourselves of the recent **journey** from 1999 – 2015, when our country happily **returned** to *democratic rule*.
(President Buhari, October 1, 2017. CIV)

This legitimisation goal is particularly significant when considering the relative success of civilian transitions in Nigeria, evidenced by six civilian-to-civilian democratic transitions since 2003 at the time. Each transition has not merely been a change in leadership but has symbolised a reaffirmation of democratic values and norms. The JOURNEY metaphor encapsulates this sentiment, portraying each election as a milestone in a larger, ongoing JOURNEY toward a more robust DEMOCRACY. By emphasising the completion of the JOURNEY, civilian leaders foster a narrative of stability and resilience, countering the historical disruptions caused by military interventions. Besides, the JOURNEY metaphor, which its mapping principle highlights the arrival frame in CIV, functions as a legitimisation strategy of finality and institutional continuity, reinforcing the legitimacy of civilian rule as the endpoint of the nation's long and troubled evolutionary democratic journey.

To sum, both discourses utilise the JOURNEY metaphor to advance a hegemonic conception of DEMOCRACY that reduces DEMOCRACY to a technical "path" managed by elites, obscuring power asymmetries. The conception also normalises elite dominance, placing military and civilian leaders as "pilots" and "navigators," while relegating citizens to passive "passengers." Next, we examine conceptual metaphor, DEMOCRACY IS A BUILDING and its (pre)legitimation objectives.

4.3 DEMOCRACY IS A BUILDING: Rationalising Foundations and Consolidating Power

The BUILDING metaphor has been utilised to frame democracy between military and civilian leaders in NPD. This metaphor accounts for 29.45% and 33.73% of the dominant SDs in military and civilian corpora respectively. The metaphor is significantly associated with the civilian leaders. Some scholars (e.g., Charteris-Black 2004; Chigbu et al. 2025; Lu and Ahrens 2008) have also identified BUILDING as an SD for different corresponding target domains. Charteris-Black (2004) stated that BUILDING as a domain has a highly positive connotation for it portrays "aspiration towards desired social goals" (70).

The mapping principle (MP) of DEMOCRACY IS A BUILDING in MIL focuses on the idea of foundation and refers to: *DEMOCRACY IS A BUILDING in that the structure of a new building or a collapsed building begins by laying a new foundation and the coming into power of the military governments is the laying of a new foundation of the collapsed DEMOCRACY in 1966 and 1983.*

In CIV, where the BUILDING metaphor is significantly used, the mapping principle (MP) centres on the construction process and refers to: *DEMOCRACY IS A BUILDING in that a building construction is successfully being ongoing when every part of the building is continuously being moulded or joined solidly together and the*

foundation of DEMOCRACY which the military governments laid in 1979 and 1999 and handed over to civilian leader should be consolidated.

Having stated the rationale (i.e., MP) for the source-target pairing, we critically examine the de/legitimation role of the metaphor SD. The role of the BUILDING metaphor in MIL and CIV corroborates with Charteris-Black's (2004) claim that the BUILDING metaphor expresses desire toward a goal. But in this case, it is a democratisation goal. For instance, Examples 6 and 7 below show the aspirations of Generals Babangida and Abacha, who ruled Nigeria from 1985 to 1998, to lay a new foundation for DEMOCRACY. Their aspiration somewhat presupposed that a foundation for DEMOCRACY has not been laid at the time or had collapsed and hence, the need for rebuilding from a start. Similarly, the BUILDING metaphor is used by the civilian presidents, Obasanjo and Jonathan, to indicate evidence of action towards a political goal. The political goal for the civilian leaders is mainly re-election. Successful elections or re-elections are one of the ways DEMOCRACY is built upon. Another function the use of the BUILDING metaphor performs is to canvass for political support toward an ongoing political process and to ensure inclusivity. To achieve this function, the BUILDING metaphor is mostly used in the context of the plural personal pronouns. Again, in most instances of the data understudy, the political leaders used the BUILDING metaphor to drive support for DEMOCRACY. The reason for this may stem from the fact that building in the real world demands communal input from the architect, to the structural engineer, the bricklayers and the helpers.

- (6) On several occasions, I have stressed the point that, we must look inwards, and retrospectively to our past for **building blocks** on which to **construct** the *Third republic* (General Ibrahim Babangida, October 20, 1990. MIL)
- (7) I salute all patriotic Nigerians for their goodwill and support towards our collective efforts to **lay a solid foundation** for an enduring *democracy* and sustainable development. (General Abacha, January 4, 1998. MIL)

As mentioned earlier, the MPs of the BUILDING metaphor centre on the foundation and construction process for the military and the civilian corpora, correspondingly. The different MPs highlight two viewpoints: substructure frame (in MIL) and superstructure frame (in CIV). At the level of the foundation or substructure, efforts made towards DEMOCRACY are usually less visible and quantifiable from a layman's perspective. Therefore, the BUILDING metaphor serves as a critical legitimation strategy employed by military leadership. Invoking the metaphor allows them to justify their rule as a necessary intervention to establish a stable foundation for DEMOCRACY. This framing aligns with the legitimation strategy of rationalisation (Reyes 2011), where an action is justified as a logical, necessary step in a larger process. Such framing can also obscure the often-undemocratic

practices associated with military governance, such as, the suppression of dissent, and the use of death sentence against opposition. For instance, General Abacha's statement in (7) above illustrates how military leaders frame their actions as foundational, thereby justifying their extended rule as essential for the nation's stability; and equally evade accountability for their governance. This macro-level evasion of accountability may corroborate Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that the pragmatic goal of metaphor is to minimise the speaker's accountability.

Furthermore, by emphasising "foundational" work (e.g., "laying a solid foundation for democracy" – Example 7, General Abacha 1998), Military leaders framed coups as necessary to "rebuild" a "collapsed" democratic structure. This rhetoric aligns with proceduralist justifications for authoritarianism, where military rule is portrayed as a transitional phase to stabilise institutions (Linz 2000). This is another instance of conceptual flip-siding, where the destructive act of a coup is reframed as the constructive act of "foundation-laying". Reflectively, if the military actually laid a foundation for democratic rule, Onwutuebe (2022) describes the foundation or enduring legacies of military rule in Nigeria as a culture of militarism, marked by suppression of dissent, human rights violations, and undemocratic governance.

- (8) We must commend ourselves and thank God that our *democracy* is getting more **consolidated**. (President Olusegun Obasanjo, October 1, 2005. CIV)
- (9) Our administration has made a commitment to ensure that we **build** and **sustain** a *democratic infrastructure* anchored on free and fair elections. (President Goodluck Jonathan, October 1, 2014. CIV)
- (10) Fellow Nigerians, as we **build** our *democracy*, leaders must show temperance at all times. (President Goodluck Jonathan, November 11, 2014. CIV)

In CIV, the metaphor frame, revealed by the MP, focuses on the construction or superstructure level. At this level, the BUILDING is visible to everyone. Civilian leaders leverage the BUILDING metaphor to assert their legitimacy by focusing on the construction and consolidation (i.e., superstructure level) of democratic principles. On one hand, the emphasis on building and sustaining democratic structures compels civilian leaders to deliver tangible benefits, or "dividends of democracy," to the populace. For example, President Jonathan's call for temperance among leaders (Example 10) while stating, "As we build our democracy," not only underscores the importance of ethical governance but also reinforces the idea that DEMOCRACY requires collective effort and accountability (9),(10). This approach, in line with procedural aspects of DEMOCRACY, necessitates transparency and public participation, while also reflecting substantive democratic values that prioritise social justice and citizen engagement. However, Jonathan's

“democratic infrastructure” rhetoric (9) reduces DEMOCRACY to electoral mechanics, sidelining substantive issues like poverty (Ake 1991). This can be seen as a subtle form of legitimization, where the focus on “building” and “infrastructure” depoliticises DEMOCRACY, turning it into a manageable project rather than a site of substantive struggle. Additionally, claims of “consolidation” by President Obasanjo (8) prioritises symbolic acts (e.g., elections) over equitable outcomes, mirroring neo-institutionalist theories that conflate form with function (Bratton and van de Walle 1997).

Finally, the BUILDING metaphor matches with the procedural view of DEMOCRACY as a system that requires institutional frameworks and processes to function effectively. The focus on foundational work by military leaders suggests a belief in a systematic approach to governance, albeit one that may undermine democratic norms in practice. In contrast, the civilian emphasis on construction and consolidation corroborates with the substantive view of, which prioritises outcomes such as citizen engagement, political equality, and social justice. Importantly, Charteris-Black (2004) described the BUILDING metaphor as being positively connotative. However, our analysis indicates that such affirmation may not be inherent but dependent on many contextual variables. Also, in our corpora, the military and civilian leaders’ framing of DEMOCRACY AS BUILDING normalise elite authority by positioning military and civilian leaders as “architects” and citizens as passive “helpers”. The plural pronoun “we” and “our” (“we build our democracy”) superficially invoke inclusivity but masks elite control, thereby advancing a hegemonic signification of DEMOCRACY as an elite-controlled project (Good 2003), particularly in Nigeria and Africa in general.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that in Nigerian political discourse, the concept of DEMOCRACY is a highly contested, strategic resource used by both military and civilian leaders to secure legitimacy. By integrating metaphor and mapping principles analysis with a framework of Discourse-Conceptual Analysis and critical legitimization studies, we have moved beyond identifying metaphorical patterns to explaining how they function as political tools. The findings show that while military dictators and civilian leaders draw from a shared repertoire of metaphors, they deploy them to advance starkly different, yet ultimately convergent, ideological projects.

The JOURNEY and BUILDING metaphors, which are most dominant in both corpora, function as legitimization strategies that privilege proceduralism and elite authority. While military regimes exploit the “departure” and “substructure”


frames from the two SDs, respectively, to justify authoritarianism, civilian leaders deploy the “arrival” and “superstructure” frames to legitimise incrementalism. Specifically, through an analysis of their mapping principles, we have shown how these metaphorical frames are deployed. Military leaders use them to perform conceptual flip-siding, framing anti-democratic acts as pro-democratic necessities. They engage in pre-legitimation by creating imaginaries of a future democratic state to justify current authoritarian rule, and they use rationalisation to present their interventions as logical, unavoidable steps. Both approaches obscure substantive democratic gaps, perpetuating a hegemonic conception of DEMOCRACY as an elite-managed project. Through these metaphors, leaders conceptualise DEMOCRACY as a technical, depoliticised project, thereby consolidating their authority while marginalising civic agency.

This study contributes a clear empirical illustration of how authoritarian and civilian actors strategically manipulate liberal-democratic concepts for political gain. It shows that the legitimation paradox, whereby undemocratic leaders use democratic language, is not merely rhetorical hypocrisy but a sophisticated discursive strategy that redefines political reality. Furthermore, while the military/civilian dichotomy provides a crucial analytical lens for this study, we acknowledge that the legitimation of DEMOCRACY in Nigeria is shaped by a host of other contextual factors. Future research should examine how ethno-regional affiliations, political or economic crises, and international influences shape these discursive strategies, providing deeper insights into Nigeria’s political landscape. Additionally, a comprehensive analysis of the competing semantic fields of DEMOCRACY is essential to further explore its ideological contestation and enrich discourse-conceptual understandings.

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