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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RULING CLASS DOMINATION AND LUMPEN PROLETARIAT MARGINALITY: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA, KENYA, AND SOUTH AFRICA, 2015-2025

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Abstract

Existing studies of African political economy have extensively examine d elite domination, neo-patrimonialism, inequality, and political marginalisation, but comparatively limited attention has been devoted to how ruling-class power is reproduced through its relationship with the lumpen proletariat across different African political economies. Addressing this gap, this study examines how ruling-class domination interacts with lumpen proletariat marginality and the implications of this relationship for political and socio-economic development in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa between 2015 and 2025. The analysis is anchored primarily in Marxist class analysis, complemented by dependency and postcolonial state perspectives. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative comparative desk-review design based on the purposive selection and thematic analysis of twenty five peer-reviewed scholarship, official publications, policy documents, and reports from reputable national and international institutions. Evidence is organised comparatively around patterns of elite accumulation, socio-economic marginalisation, political mobilisation,patronage, informal governance, and developmental consequences across the three countries. The findings demonstrate that unemployment, inequality, urban precarity, and expanding informal economies have enlarged politically and economically marginal populations, while sections of the ruling class strategically incorporate these groups into patronage networks,electoral mobilisation, political violence, and informal systems of political control. Such relationships reproduce dependency, weaken institutional accountability,and constrain inclusive development, although marginali sed groups also retain the capacity for collective resistance and political agency.

The study contributes to African political economy scholarship by conceptualising the elite-lumpen relationship as a reciprocal but structurally unequal mechanism through which political domination and marginality are reproduced

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across different national contexts. It recommends inclusive employment creation, institutional accountability, urban social protection, and reforms that reduce dependence on patronage-based political incorporation.

Introduction:-

More than six decades after the first wave of African independence, the relationship between political power, social inequality, and development remains a central concern in African political economy. Independence transferred formal political authority from colonial administrations to African governments, but it did not automatically dismantle the economic structures, social inequalities, or patterns of accumulation inherited from colonial rule. In many countries, postcolonial governments took control of states whose economies remained dependent on commodity exports, external capital, and institutions originally designed more for extraction than broad-based development. These inherited structures have subsequently interacted with domestic political interests, global economic pressures, demographic change, and rapid urbanisation to shape contemporary patterns of power and inequality (Rodney, 1972; Amin, 1976; Acemoglu& Robinson, 2012). Understanding African development therefore requires attention not only to institutions and economic policies but also to the class relationships through which political and economic power is exercised.

One important dimension of this political economy is the character of the ruling class. In the context of this study, the ruling class encompasses political elites, senior state officials, politically connected business actors, and other influential groups whose positions provide privileged access to state institutions, public resources, and economic opportunities. Unlike the classical industrial bourgeoisie whose economic influence rests primarily on ownership of productive capital, sections of Africa's ruling elites have historically accumulated wealth through control of the state, natural-resource rents, public contracts, regulatory privileges, and connections with domestic and international capital. Earlier political economy scholarship described aspects of this formation through concepts such as the comprador bourgeoisie, dependency, and peripheral capitalism (Frank, 1967; Rodney, 1972; Amin, 1976). Although African economies and elite structures have changed considerably since these formulations emerged, the underlying question of how access to political authority becomes a means of economic accumulation remains relevant.

These patterns of accumulation are reinforced in some contexts by patronage and clientelist relationships. Formal democratic institutions may operate alongside informal arrangements through which political loyalty is exchanged for access to jobs, contracts, protection, cash, or other material benefits. Such practices should not be treated as uniform across Africa, nor should they imply that formal institutions are irrelevant. Rather, their significance varies according to national political histories, institutional capacity, economic structures, and patterns of political competition. Nevertheless, where access to public resources is strongly mediated by political connections, elites have incentives to cultivate constituencies whose economic vulnerability makes patronage particularly consequential.

It is within this setting that the concept of the lumpen proletariat becomes analytically important. Originating in Marxist class analysis, the concept traditionally referred to groups situated outside stable relations of productive wage labour. Its application to contemporary Africa requires caution because informal employment, unemployment, poverty, and lumpen status are not synonymous. This study therefore does not classify Africa's poor or informal workers indiscriminately as lumpen proletarians. Instead, the term is used more narrowly to describe socially and economically precarious groups whose weak attachment to stable formal employment, limited social protection, and political marginality can make them particularly vulnerable to incorporation into informal political and economic networks. Depending on national circumstances, these may include sections of unemployed urban youth, casual workers, street-based economic actors, informal political enforcers, and others surviving at the margins of secure employment and formal institutional protection.

The growth of such precarious populations has become increasingly important as African societies have urbanised without generating formal employment at a comparable pace. Expanding cities have created new economic opportunities, but they have also concentrated unemployment, insecure work, inadequate housing, and uneven access to public services. Earlier structural adjustment programmes reduced public employment and social expenditure in many countries, while subsequent economic liberalisation has not always produced sufficient labour-intensiveindustrialisation to absorb rapidly growing urban populations. The result is not simply the expansion of an informal economy but a more complex urban landscape in which formal employment, informal livelihoods, political brokerage, entrepreneurship, and economic insecurity coexist (Davis, 2006; Standing, 2011). Economic marginality does not, however, imply political irrelevance. Marginalised urban groups frequently occupy strategically important positions in African politics. Their demographic weight and concentration in electorally significant urban areas can make them important constituencies, while economic insecurity may expose some groups to clientelist recruitment. During competitive elections, political actors may distribute cash, food, temporary employment, protection, or other benefits in return for mobilisation and political loyalty. In more extreme circumstances, marginalised youth networks may be recruited for intimidation, disruption, or electoral violence. Yet these populations should not be understood simply as passive instruments of elite manipulation. The same social groups can organise protests, challenge established authority, participate in social movements, and develop alternative forms of political agency. The elite-lumpen relationship is therefore contested and fluid rather than entirely one-directional.

This tension exposes an important gap in the existing literature. Studies of African political economy have generated substantial knowledge about elite formation, dependency, neo-patrimonialism, clientelism, informal economies, unemployment, urban poverty, and political violence. However, these strands of scholarship are often examined separately. Elite-centred studies tend to concentrate on how political leaders capture institutions and distribute resources, while research on marginality commonly approaches unemployment, informality, and urban precarity primarily as developmental or social-policy problems. Scholarship on electoral violence and clientelism, meanwhile, frequently examines the mobilisation of disadvantaged groups without locating those practices within the wider class relationship between elite accumulation and persistent socio-economic marginality. Consequently, less attention has been given to the elite-lumpen relationship itself as a mechanism through which political domination and socio-economic marginality may be mutually reproduced, particularly through systematic comparison across different African political economies.

The study addresses this gap by bringing these bodies of scholarship into a common comparative political economy framework. Rather than examining ruling-class domination and lumpen marginality as separate phenomena, it investigates how they interact and how that interaction affects governance and development. Its contribution lies particularly in conceptualising marginality not simply as an outcome of underdevelopment but also as a political resource that can be selectively incorporated into patronage, electoral mobilisation, informal governance, and, in some cases, coercive political networks. At the same time, the study recognises the agency of marginalised groups and examines the circumstances under which political incorporation can coexist with resistance to elite domination. This relational perspective provides a more nuanced explanation of how economic exclusion and political power reinforce, but can also challenge, one another.

Empirically, the study focuses on Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa between 2015 and 2025. The cases provide useful comparative variation without suggesting that three countries represent the entire African continent. Nigeria illustrates the interaction between resource dependence, state-centred accumulation, patronage, and a large informal economy. Kenya provides a setting in which competitive electoral politics, informal urban economies, political brokerage, and historically entrenched elite networks intersect. South Africa offers a contrasting case of a more industrialised economy in which severe unemployment and inequality coexist with relatively developed formal institutions and the enduring socio-economic consequences of apartheid. Comparing the three makes it possible to distinguish recurring patterns from dynamics that are specific to particular historical and institutional settings.

The 2015-2025 period is particularly useful because it captures a decade marked by increasing economic pressures, rapid urbanisation, persistent youth unemployment, expanding informal livelihoods, contentious electoral politics, protest mobilisation, and growing demands for accountable governance across the three countries. Restricting the analysis to this period also enables the study to examine contemporary manifestations of class relations rather than treating postcolonial Africa as an undifferentiated historical experience.

Against this background, the study asks: How does the relationship between the ruling class and the lumpen proletariat shape political governance, social stability, and development outcomes in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa between 2015 and 2025? Using a comparative political economy approach, it examines how economically marginal groups become incorporated into systems of patronage and political mobilisation, how these relationships differ across the three countries, and what consequences they have for institutions and inclusive development. The central argument is that persistent marginality is not merely a social consequence of weak development. Under particular political and institutional conditions, it can become intertwined with the reproduction of elite power. Understanding this relationship provides a clearer basis for explaining why political inclusion can coexist with economic exclusion and why formal democratic competition does not necessarily translate into broad-based developmental transformation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework:-

This study adopts Marxist Political Economy as its principal theoretical framework, complemented by Dependency Theory. The two perspectives are combined because the relationship between ruling-class domination and lumpen-proletariat marginality operates simultaneously at domestic and international levels. Marxist Political Economy explains how control over material resources and state institutions structures class power within society, while Dependency Theory situates these domestic class relations within Africa's historically unequal incorporation into the global capitalist economy. Used together, they provide a framework for explaining not only why marginality persists but also how it can become connected to the reproduction of political power.

Marxist Political Economy and Domestic Class Domination:-

Marxist Political Economy originates principally from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and rests on the proposition that political power cannot be understood independently of material production and class relations (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978; Marx, 1867/1976). Control over economic resources provides dominant classes with the capacity to influence the state, law, political institutions, and the distribution of opportunities. From this perspective, inequality is not simply a difference in individual income or social status; it reflects underlying relationships of power through which some groups exercise greater control over resources and institutions than others.

This insight requires some adaptation to the African postcolonial context. In many African political economies, sections of the ruling class derive their influence not primarily from direct ownership of industrial means of production but from privileged access to the state and its distributive institutions. Political authority can provide access to natural-resource rents, public contracts, appointments, regulatory privileges, land, security institutions, and other opportunities for accumulation. The state consequently becomes both an arena of political competition and an important mechanism through which economic advantages are acquired and reproduced.

Marx's treatment of the lumpen proletariat provides a second important dimension of the framework. He used the concept for groups situated outside stable productive labour and regarded their insecure social position as making them susceptible to political mobilisation by dominant forces. Applied cautiously to contemporary Africa, this insight draws attention to the political implications of unemployment, precarious livelihoods, and weak incorporation into formal labour markets.

The concept should not, however, be used to equate all informal workers, unemployed people, or poor citizens with the lumpen proletariat. Such an interpretation would obscure the diversity and productive importance of Africa's informal economies. In this study, lumpen-proletariat marginality refers more specifically to conditions of sustained economic precarity, weak attachment to secure employment, limited access to institutional protection, and vulnerability to informal or clientelist forms of political incorporation.

Fanon's reinterpretation of marginalised populations provides an important qualification to the classical Marxist position. Rather than treating them exclusively as politically manipulable, Fanon (1961) recognised their potential agency within colonial and postcolonial struggles. The framework therefore understands marginalised populations as occupying a dual political position: they may be recruited into patronage, electoral mobilisation, political violence, or informal enforcement, but they may also organise protests and challenge established political arrangements. This prevents the analysis from reducing them to passive recipients of elite influence.

Marxist Political Economy therefore directs the empirical analysis towards four observable dimensions: elite control of state resources, patterns of accumulation, political incorporation of marginal groups, and the consequences of these relationships for governance and development. These dimensions provide the basis for examining whether similar mechanisms operate differently in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa.

Dependency Theory and the Structural Production of Marginality:-

Dependency Theory complements this domestic class analysis by locating African political economies within historically unequal international economic relations. Associated with scholars such as Frank (1967, 1972), Amin (1976), Rodney (1972), and Cardoso and Faletto (1979), Dependency Theory challenges explanations that attribute underdevelopment primarily to internal cultural or institutional deficiencies. Instead, it argues that colonialism and the subsequent incorporation of African economies into global capitalism created economic structures characterised by commodity dependence, unequal exchange, technological dependence, external financing, and limited domestic productive transformation.

Dependency analysis is particularly relevant to the character of the postcolonial ruling class. Local elites can operate as intermediaries between external economic interests and domestic structures of accumulation. Their economic interests may therefore become linked to multinational corporations, international finance, commodity exports, foreign investment, external borrowing, and other international sources of capital. This does not mean that African elites lack agency or that external forces mechanically determine domestic political outcomes. Rather, external dependence interacts with domestic interests, institutions, and political choices.

The same framework provides an explanation for persistent socio-economic marginality. Economies that generate substantial rents or export earnings without corresponding expansion of labour-intensive productive sectors may experience growth without sufficient creation of secure employment. Weak industrial absorption, unemployment, underemployment, and precarious urban livelihoods can consequently coexist with substantial elite accumulation. The existing framework identifies this relationship between weak formal labour absorption and expanding marginality as particularly important across the three cases.

Dependency Theory therefore directs attention to three empirical dimensions: external economic dependence, the relationship between external capital and domestic elite accumulation, and the effects of dependent economic structures on employment and socio-economic inclusion. These dimensions complement the domestic mechanisms identified through Marxist Political Economy.

Integrating the Theories: A Conceptual Framework:-
The central analytical proposition of this study is that external dependency and domestic class domination interact to reproduce socio-economic marginality, while marginality itself can become politically incorporated into mechanisms of elite power. The relationship is therefore understood as a connected process rather than a collection of separate social problems.

The conceptual framework follows this sequence:-
External structural dependency
(commodity dependence, foreign capital, debt, multinational corporations, unequal global economic relations)
↓
Ruling-class accumulation and state control
(control of rents, public resources, contracts, appointments, regulatory institutions and political opportunities)
↓
Weak productive transformation and unequal distribution
(limited employment creation, inequality, economic exclusion and uneven access to opportunities)
↓
Lumpen-proletariat marginality
(precarious livelihoods, unemployment, weak social protection and insecure political-economic incorporation)
↓
Political incorporation and/or resistance
(clientelism, patronage, electoral mobilisation, political violence, informal enforcement, protest and collective action)
↓
Governance and developmental consequences
(institutional weakness, political instability, inequality, limited social mobility and constrained inclusive development)
Feedback effect: Where political elites successfully use patronage and precarious political incorporation to reproduce their control of the state, the resulting governance arrangements can preserve the economic structures that generate marginality, thereby restarting the cycle.

This framework introduces an important qualification: the causal relationship is not deterministic. External dependence does not automatically produce identical ruling classes, and economic marginality does not inevitably result in clientelism or political violence. Institutions, historical legacies, political organisation, civil society, social movements, and the agency of marginalised populations mediate these relationships. The comparative analysis therefore investigates both common mechanisms and national variation rather than assuming uniform outcomes across Africa. The theoretical constructs are translated into empirical indicators to guide the comparative analysis:

Table 1: Operationalisation of the Conceptual Framework

Theoretical construct	Analytical meaning	Empirical indicators	Expected relationship
External dependency	Reliance on external economic structures and actors	Commodity dependence, external finance, foreign capital, multinational corporate influence	Shapes opportunities and constraints facing domestic elites
Ruling-class domination	Concentrated elite control over political and distributive institutions	State rents, public contracts, appointments, patronage networks, control of political institutions	Facilitates elite accumulation and unequal resource distribution
Economic exclusion	Limited incorporation into secure productive activity	Unemployment, underemployment, inequality, weak formal labour absorption	Increases socio-economic precarity
Lumpen-proletariat marginality	Persistent economic and institutional precarity	Insecure livelihoods, weak social protection, unstable employment and marginal political incorporation	Creates vulnerability to patronage but may also stimulate resistance
Elite-lumpen political relationship	Interaction between elite strategies and marginalised populations	Clientelism, electoral mobilisation, informal enforcement, political violence, protest and collective action	May reproduce domination or generate challenges to elite authority
Developmental outcomes	Political and socio-economic consequences of these relationships	Institutional accountability, political stability, inclusion, social mobility and development performance	Reflect the cumulative effects of class domination and marginality

Source: Authors' conceptualization, 2026.

The framework is applied comparatively rather than mechanically. Nigeria is examined particularly through resource rents, state-centred accumulation, patronage, political mobilisation and informal livelihoods. Kenya provides a basis for examining political brokerage, elite networks, electoral mobilisation and precarious urban livelihoods. South Africa allows analysis of persistent inequality, unemployment, township and informal-settlement marginality, and protest politics within a more industrialised institutional setting. These manifestations are already identifiable in the original theoretical discussion.

Analytical Propositions:-

From the integrated framework, the study advances three propositions. First, the greater the concentration of economic and political opportunities around state and elite-controlled networks, the greater the likelihood that socio-economic marginality will be reproduced rather than substantially reduced. Second, persistent economic precarity increases opportunities for clientelist and informal political incorporation, although marginalised populations retain the capacity to resist elite domination. Third, external economic dependence interacts with domestic elite interests to constrain productive transformation, thereby linking international structural inequalities to domestic patterns of marginalisation.

These propositions guide the empirical analysis of Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa between 2015 and 2025. Marxist Political Economy consequently explains the internal mechanisms of class domination and political incorporation, while Dependency Theory explains the external structural conditions within which those relationships develop. Their integration makes it possible to trace a coherent analytical pathway from external dependency and elite accumulation to socio-economic marginality, political mobilisation, and ultimately governance and development outcomes. In this way, the theories function not merely as descriptive background but as an explicit framework for interpreting and comparing the empirical evidence.

Methodology:-

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine the relationship between the ruling class and the lumpen proletariat in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa between 2015 and 2025. The three countries were purposively selected to capture regional and political-economic variation: Nigeria represents a resource-dependent political economy shaped by rentier and patronage dynamics; Kenya reflects competitive politics, political brokerage, and a large informal economy; while South Africa combines a relatively industrialised economy with persistent unemployment and deep socio-economic inequality. Documentary data were drawn from 25 purposively selected sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government publications, policy documents, reports of recognised international organisations, and credible media publications. Searches focused on combinations of terms such as ruling class, political elites, lumpen proletariat, youth marginalisation, informal economy, patronage, political mobilisation, and the names of the three countries.

Documents were included where they fell within or provided essential context for the study period, addressed at least one of the core themes, and contained relevant empirical or theoretical evidence. Sources lacking clear authorship, relevance, or sufficient credibility were excluded. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the documents were read systematically, relevant passages were coded, and related codes were grouped into recurring themes, including elite domination, patronage, economic marginality, political mobilisation, coercion, resistance, and developmental consequences. These themes were subsequently compared across the three cases and interpreted through Marxist Political Economy and Dependency Theory. Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, although reliance on secondary evidence limits causal inference and wider generalisation.

Findings and Discussion:-

Ruling-Class Structure and Modes of Accumulation:-

Evidence from Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa shows that political and economic power remains concentrated within networks of political office holders, senior bureaucrats, business interests, and other actors with privileged access to state resources. Although the form of this relationship varies across the three countries, access to public contracts, natural-resource rents, land, regulatory authority, and political connections remains an important route to accumulation. This pattern supports the Marxist argument that control over material resources reinforces political power, but it also shows that contemporary elite domination is not based solely on ownership of productive capital. Rather, control over the state and its distributive institutions can itself provide significant opportunities for accumulation.

Nigeria illustrates this pattern particularly clearly. Petroleum revenues have historically placed substantial economic resources under state control, making access to oil rents an important feature of elite bargaining and accumulation (Lewis, 2018). More recent research shows how the personalisation of oil-block allocation connects ruling elites, indigenous beneficiaries, and petroleum rents (Iwuoha, 2021), while Miller (2024) demonstrates that patronage and government contracts remain important mechanisms through which political resources are distributed even during periods of declining oil revenues. Kenya presents a different configuration in which political influence intersects with land, infrastructure, public procurement, and business networks. Recent research documents elite capture and “tenderpreneurship” around major infrastructure projects, while studies of land allocation show that patronage remains important but varies with political competition and institutional conditions (Dyzenhaus 2021; Gillespie, 2024). South Africa differs because of its stronger industrial and corporate base, yet political-business relationships remain important. Recent scholarship on state capture highlights how weaknesses in public procurement and state-owned enterprises created opportunities for politically connected business and political elites to extract rents from public institutions (Mohuba, 2025).

The comparison therefore reveals a shared pattern of state-mediated accumulation but important differences in its institutional form. Nigeria is distinguished by the centrality of petroleum rents and politically mediated contracting; Kenya combines land, public procurement, infrastructure, and political-business networks; while South Africa reflects a closer interaction between established corporate capital and politically connected accumulation within comparatively stronger formal institutions. These findings confirm dependency-oriented arguments that domestic accumulation remains connected to wider economic structures, but they also qualify any assumption of a uniform African ruling class. Elite domination is instead shaped by different combinations of state power, domestic capital, external economic relationships, and historically specific institutions. This comparative evidence therefore extends classical Marxist analysis by showing that, in these three cases, political access to the state remains an important means through which economic advantage is acquired and reproduced.

External Dependency and Elite Power:-

Evidence from the three cases shows that external dependency remains important, although its form and intensity differ considerably. Nigeria's external integration continues to be strongly shaped by petroleum, multinational oil companies, global commodity markets, and external finance. Iwuoha (2021), for example, demonstrates how oil-block allocation connects domestic ruling elites, indigenous beneficiaries, international oil companies, and petroleum rents, while multinational corporate influence remains significant within the Niger Delta's extractive political economy. Kenya exhibits a more diversified form of external dependence involving foreign investment, development finance, international trade, infrastructure financing, and borrowing from bilateral and multilateral creditors. Zajontz (2025) shows that Kenya's diversification of external economic relationships has increased access to infrastructure and development finance but has also produced what he describes as "polydependence," as sovereign borrowing and reliance on multiple foreign creditors constrain domestic fiscal and policy space. Importantly, these external relationships are mediated by domestic class interests, as politically connected elites have benefited from foreign-financed infrastructure and Kenya's wider integration into global capital networks (Zajontz, 2025).South Africa presents a different configuration. Although it has a deeper industrial and financial system, its integration into global financial markets and dependence on foreign investment expose domestic policy to external pressures. Research on South African monetary policy finds that such integration can constrain economic policy autonomy, while the country's access to international financial safety nets remains uneven (Musthaq, 2021).

These patterns broadly confirm Dependency Theory's contention that domestic class relations and development choices cannot be separated from countries' positions within the international political economy. Contemporary dependency, however, extends beyond the traditional core–periphery relationship based on commodity extraction. Musthaq (2021) identifies financialisation as an important contemporary mechanism of subordinate integration, while Zajontz (2022) shows how debt and infrastructure financing continue to reproduce financial dependency across Africa. The evidence from Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa nevertheless challenges a deterministic reading of Dependency Theory. Similar exposure to global capital does not generate identical domestic outcomes because external pressures are filtered through different institutions, economic structures, elite interests, and historical experiences. The findings therefore confirm the continuing relevance of dependency while extending the theory by emphasising domestic political agency: external dependence establishes important constraints, but political elites and institutions shape how those constraints are negotiated, reproduced, or occasionally resisted.

Economic Marginalisation and Informal Employment:-

Economic marginalisation constitutes the strongest point of convergence among the cases, although its scale and form differ significantly. Nigeria provides particularly striking evidence of labour-market informality. The National Bureau of Statistics reported that 92.3% of employment was informal in the third quarter of 2023, increasing to 92.7% in the first quarter of 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024).

Kenya similarly depends heavily on informal employment. The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics reported that of approximately 782,300 jobs created in 2024, 703,700 were generated in the informal sector (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2025). The evidence therefore demonstrates the importance of informality without treating informal work itself as equivalent to lumpen status.

South Africa presents a different pattern. Its central problem is less the predominance of informal employment than persistent exclusion from employment altogether. Statistics South Africa reports that The unemployment rate among people aged 15-34 increased from 36.9% in the first quarter of 2015 to 46.1% in the first quarter of 2025 (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2025).. This distinction is theoretically important. Marginality in Nigeria and Kenya is closely associated with extensive informal economic participation, whereas in South Africa it is more strongly connected to unemployment and exclusion from a comparatively developed formal economy.

Urbanisation provides the broader spatial setting for these processes. World Bank data based on UN population estimates indicate that in 2024, approximately 63% of Nigeria's population, 32% of Kenya's, and 64% of South Africa's was urban (World Bank, 2024). Urbanisation should therefore not be treated as uniform across the cases. What matters analytically is the extent to which expanding urban populations can access employment, housing, infrastructure and social protection. These findings extend earlier scholarship on urban marginality by demonstrating that lumpenisation should not be inferred from unemployment or informality alone. Informal workers may be economically productive and politically autonomous. The relevant condition is the combination of livelihood insecurity, weak institutional protection, limited mobility, and vulnerability to political incorporation. This distinction provides a more precise application of Marxist class categories to contemporary African political economies.

Political Mobilisation and the Instrumentalisation of Marginality:-

The clearest difference among the three cases concerns how economically marginalised groups enter political processes. In Nigeria, unemployed and economically vulnerable youth have been incorporated into patronage networks, electoral mobilisation, militancy and informal security arrangements. The Niger Delta provides particularly strong evidence of this relationship. Iwilade (2017) shows that youth militancy emerged partly from grievances surrounding social and environmental injustice but was subsequently incorporated into a post-amnesty system that reconnected young people to political patrons. More recently, Ebiede and Langer (2023) found that the Presidential Amnesty Programme contributed to the emergence of former militant leaders as influential political and economic actors, partly through lucrative security contracts and control over access to programme benefits. The Nigerian case therefore demonstrates a movement from confrontation towards selective incorporation, although this has not eliminated the underlying conditions that generated militancy.

Kenya displays a comparable but more strongly electoral and historically ethnicised pattern. Studies of Kenyan elections have linked political violence to clientelism, ethno-regional competition and weak party institutionalisation (Kanyinga&Odote, 2019). Yet the relationship is more complex than straightforward elite manipulation. Rasmussen and van Stapele (2020), drawing on ethnographic research among youth groups in Nairobi's poorer settlements during the 2017 primary elections, show that young people's relationships with politicians involve material survival, political recognition, redistribution and their own exercise of agency. Their findings challenge interpretations that reduce marginalised youth to passive instruments of patronage politics. Economic vulnerability therefore creates opportunities for political brokerage, but youth actors can also negotiate these relationships to pursue their own political and livelihood interests.

South Africa provides the strongest contrast. Here, marginalised communities are more visibly associated with grassroots protest and community mobilisation than with direct incorporation into elite electoral networks. Recent research in Gugulethu and Khayelitsha demonstrates that struggles over inadequate housing, water, electricity and other basic services continue to drive collective mobilisation among low-income communities (Chiwarawara, 2024). Chiwarawara (2023) similarly shows that participants in service-delivery protests articulate their own grievances and political demands rather than simply functioning as instruments of established elites. This finding qualifies Marx's relatively pessimistic conception of the lumpen proletariat and more closely reflects Fanon's (1961) emphasis on the potential political agency of marginalised populations. Across the three cases, therefore, marginality has no predetermined political outcome: it can facilitate patronage and selective co-optation, as evident in Nigeria; negotiated electoral mobilisation, as in Kenya; or more autonomous collective resistance, as the South African case demonstrates.

Table 2. Systematic Comparison of the Three Cases

Indicator	Nigeria	Kenya	South Africa
Elite domination	State-centred, rent and patronage intensive	Political-business networks and brokerage	Political-corporate interaction within stronger formal institutions
Marginalisation	High informality and precarious employment	Informal employment and insecure urban livelihoods	Severe unemployment and persistent inequality
Political mobilisation	Patronage, electoral mobilisation, militancy and informal enforcement	Electoral mobilisation, political brokerage and historically ethnicised networks	Protest, community mobilisation and social movements
External dependency	Oil exports, multinational capital and external finance	Foreign investment, trade and development finance	Global finance, investment and commodity markets
Institutional consequences	Fragmented authority and weakened accountability	Patronage pressures and periodic political instability	Institutional contestation and recurring protest
Development outcomes	Inequality, precarious livelihoods and limited productive transformation	Uneven inclusion and constrained socio-economic mobility	Persistent inequality, unemployment and spatial exclusion

Source: Author’s Compilation, 2026.

The comparison demonstrates that elite domination and mass marginalisation coexist in all three countries but are connected through different political mechanisms. Nigeria displays the strongest interaction between rents, patronage and political incorporation. Kenya shows a pronounced relationship between political brokerage, economic vulnerability and electoral mobilisation. South Africa, by contrast, demonstrates that severe marginalisation can generate more autonomous forms of protest even where formal institutions are comparatively stronger.

Implications for Theory and Previous Scholarship:-
Taken together, the findings both confirm and extend existing political economy scholarship. They confirm Marxist arguments that unequal control over economic resources shapes political power and that material insecurity affects patterns of political incorporation. They also support Dependency Theory by demonstrating that domestic elite accumulation remains connected to international capital, commodity markets and external economic relationships. Yet neither theory alone fully explains the differences among the three cases.

The study extends these perspectives by identifying the elite-lumpen relationship as conditional rather than uniform. Economic marginality creates vulnerability, but vulnerability does not inevitably produce political subordination. Nigeria and Kenya demonstrate how marginality may be incorporated into patronage and political mobilisation, whereas South Africa more clearly demonstrates its potential to generate autonomous protest. The evidence therefore supports Fanon's emphasis on the political agency of marginalised populations and challenges interpretations that portray them merely as passive instruments of elite politics.

A further contribution concerns the relationship between dependency and domestic institutions. The evidence suggests that external dependency becomes politically consequential through domestic structures of accumulation and distribution. Global capital does not independently create patronage or marginality; political actors mediate these pressures through decisions about rents, contracts, employment, social protection and access to economic opportunities. This finding refines Dependency Theory by placing greater emphasis on the interaction between external constraints and domestic agency.

The developmental consequences follow from this interaction. Where economic opportunities remain concentrated and marginalised populations depend heavily on informal or politically mediated access to resources, patronage can substitute for durable social inclusion. This weakens accountability and limits long-term mobility. Where marginalised groups retain greater organisational autonomy, as the South African comparison indicates, exclusion may instead generate sustained political contestation. The central finding is therefore not simply that ruling elites dominate marginal populations, but that the political consequences of marginality depend on how economic exclusion interacts with institutions, elite strategies and the capacity of marginalised groups to exercise agency.

Conclusion:-
This study demonstrates that the relationship between ruling-class domination and lumpen-proletariat marginality provides an important lens for understanding the persistent tension between democratic politics and inclusive development in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. Rather than viewing marginality simply as an outcome of poverty or weak economic performance, the study shows that it is embedded in wider structures of political power, unequal access to resources, and externally connected patterns of accumulation. At the same time, marginalised populations should not be treated as passive recipients of elite manipulation. Their responses range from accommodation and negotiated participation to protest and collective resistance, demonstrating that political agency remains important even under conditions of severe economic insecurity.

The study therefore contributes to Marxist Political Economy and Dependency Theory by showing that class domination and external dependence are neither uniform nor mechanically reproduced across different political economies. Their consequences are mediated by domestic institutions, historical experiences, political strategies, and the capacity of marginalised groups to organise and negotiate their interests. The central implication is that sustainable development requires transforming the structures that reproduce both concentrated political-economic power and persistent social exclusion. Expanding productive opportunities, strengthening accountable institutions, and reducing dependence on patronage would help shift state-society relations towards more inclusive forms of political participation and development.

Recommendations:-

1. The finding that marginality is associated with extensive informal and precarious employment in Nigeria and Kenya and severe unemployment in South Africa demonstrates the need to expand productive employment rather than rely on temporary livelihood interventions. Governments should prioritiselabour intensiveindustriali sation, support small and medium-sized enterprises, and improve access to formal employment, particularly for economically vulnerable young people. Such measures would reduce the material insecurity that makes sections of marginalised populations dependent on patronage and informal political networks.
2. The evidence shows that economic marginality is sustained not simply by unemployment but also by weak access to secure and productive economic opportunities. Technical and vocational education, apprenticeships, digital skills programmes, and employment-linked training should therefore be better aligned with labour-market opportunities. Particular attention should be given to creating credible pathways through which young people in informal and disadvantaged communities can move into more stable employment and entrepreneurship.
3. The study demonstrates that elite domination is reinforced where access to contracts, public resources, appointments, and economic opportunities is mediated by political connections. Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa should strengthen transparent procurement, conflict-of-interest regulation, independent oversight institutions, and accountability in the management of public resources. Reducing discretionary political control over economic opportunities would weaken the patronage relationships that connect economic vulnerability to political dependence.
4. The findings connect urban marginality with precarious livelihoods, inadequate services, informal political networks, and, particularly in South Africa, recurring community mobilisation. Urban policy should therefore combine affordable housing, basic services, social protection, livelihood support, and meaningful community participation in municipal decision-making. Treating marginalised communities as participants in urban governance rather than merely as security or welfare problems would address some of the structural conditions underlying political alienation and recurrent protest.
5. Evidence from Nigeria and Kenya shows that economic insecurity can be converted into a resource for patronage, political brokerage, and electoral mobilisation. Electoral authorities and governments should strengthen enforcement against vote buying, political intimidation, recruitment of informal enforcers, and the financing of electoral violence, while improving transparency in campaign finance. These reforms should be complemented by economic and civic interventions that reduce the dependence of vulnerable groups on short-term political inducements.
6. The finding that all three countries remain integrated into external structures of finance, investment, commodity markets, and development financing supports stronger regional economic cooperation. African governments should use frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area to deepen regional value chains, expand domestic and regional production, and reduce excessive dependence on primary commodity exports and externally controlled sources of capital. Regional cooperation should therefore be directed towards productive transformation and employment creation rather than integration into global markets without corresponding domestic developmental benefits.

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