

Reform Sequencing under Democratic Stress: Institutional Memory, Distributional Legitimacy, and Reform Resilience in Nigeria (2023–2026)

Aliu, Olusola Ph.D., and Sarumi, Oyewole Ph.D. Faculty, ICLED Business School, Lekki, Lagos, Tel. 234 803 304 1421, Email: leadershipmgtservice@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explains why reform sequences implemented under democratic stress sometimes become durable while others fragment or reverse. It conceptualises Nigeria's 2023–2026 reform episode as a reform-sequencing model, referred to in domestic discourse as "Tinubunomics", and develops a mechanism-based explanation of reform resilience.

The central argument is that reform durability depends on the interaction between institutional memory and distributional legitimacy. Front-loaded reforms generate immediate welfare pressures that shape contestation and compliance. At the same time, institutional memory, expressed through rules, routines, and coordination structures, determines whether policy decisions are converted into durable commitments. Reform resilience emerges where legitimacy constraints are managed, and implementation is routinised; where either mechanism is weak, reforms remain vulnerable to drift or reversal.

The paper employs theory-testing process tracing using policy documents and time-aligned organisational indicators to evaluate causal process observations across six critical junctures. Reform resilience is operationalised as institutionalisation under contestation, while distributional legitimacy captures acceptance–contestation dynamics shaped by fairness, mitigation credibility, and trust.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it advances a generalisable framework for analysing reform sequencing under democratic stress. Second, it integrates institutional memory and distributional politics into a unified explanation of reform durability. Third, it demonstrates how welfare shocks and legitimacy dynamics condition institutionalisation outcomes in resource-dependent contexts.

The findings have implications for reform design in environments characterised by distrust, insecurity, and policy complexity, highlighting the central role of mitigation credibility, coordination capacity, and institutional anchoring in sustaining reforms.

Keywords: reform sequencing; democratic stress; institutional memory; distributional legitimacy; reform resilience; subsidy reform; policy durability; process tracing; Nigeria; political economy; development governance.

1. Introduction

Economic reforms often fail not because governments choose the wrong policies, Economic reforms often fail not because governments choose the wrong policies, but because they cannot sustain them politically. This challenge is particularly acute in resource-dependent democracies, where reforms such as subsidy removal and exchange-rate liberalisation generate immediate and visible distributional shocks. These shocks can trigger resistance, weaken compliance, and ultimately derail implementation. In such contexts, the central problem is not only what reforms are adopted, but whether they become durable.

This paper builds on prior work on reform sequencing under democratic stress by examining the mechanisms through which reforms become durable under such conditions. Nigeria's 2023–2026 reform episode provides a particularly revealing case. The government implemented a series of high-stakes reforms, including subsidy withdrawal and foreign exchange restructuring, amid political contestation, economic pressure, and low public trust. While fuel subsidies have long been criticised for their regressive incidence (Soile et al., 2015), their removal generates immediate welfare pressures through price pass-through effects on transport, food distribution, and household purchasing power. Modelling evidence suggests that subsidy removal can raise economy-wide prices and reduce welfare in the absence of credible compensatory measures (Okorie et al., 2024), while policy analyses emphasise that compensation and reinvestment strategies are central to both sustainability and perceived fairness (Shittu, 2024; Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, 2023). These dynamics unfold within a broader context of social vulnerability and contestation that can amplify resistance and constrain state capacity (von Uexkull et al., 2024; World Bank, 2024). Under such conditions, reform durability cannot be assumed; it must be explained. This raises a central question in political economy: why do some reforms become institutionalised and durable under hostile conditions, while others fragment or fail?

The paper addresses a gap in the literature. Existing research explains reform outcomes either in technocratic terms, emphasising policy correctness, or in political terms, focusing on protest and bargaining dynamics. However, less attention has been paid to the institutional mechanisms through which reforms become durable in hostile environments. While subsidy and liberalisation reforms are well studied in terms of welfare effects and

contestation (Soile et al., 2015; Okorie et al., 2024; von Uexkull et al., 2024), there is limited understanding of how reform sequences are converted into routinised practices, coordination structures, and credible commitments that persist under conditions of distrust and policy complexity (Stark, 2019; Stark & Head, 2019; Vince et al., 2024). This gap is critical because institutionalisation distinguishes reform episodes that endure from those that fragment into inconsistency or reversal.

This paper advances a mechanism-based explanation centred on two linked outcomes: reform resilience and distributional legitimacy. Reform resilience refers to the extent to which reforms become institutionalised, embedded in rules, routines, and coordination arrangements, and remain resistant to reversal under contestation. Distributional legitimacy refers to acceptance–contestation dynamics shaped by perceived fairness, mitigation credibility, and trust. These outcomes are analytically distinct but causally connected: legitimacy conditions the political space for implementation, while resilience captures whether reforms become durable institutional arrangements.

The core argument is that reform resilience under democratic stress depends on the interaction between institutional memory and distributional legitimacy. Institutional memory, understood as retained know-how, coordination routines, and learning structures, enables governments to implement complex reforms consistently and to convert policy decisions into credible commitments. In contrast, institutional fragmentation and “amnesia” undermine continuity and increase the likelihood of discretionary drift (Stark, 2019; Stark & Head, 2019). At the same time, distributional legitimacy acts as a binding political constraint: visible welfare losses and weak mitigation credibility can intensify contestation and reduce compliance, thereby constraining institutionalisation (Okorie et al., 2024; von Uexkull et al., 2024). Communication and framing may shape support, but their effects are conditional on trust and delivery credibility (Bodó, 2022), while rising policy complexity can further erode both legitimacy and implementation capacity (Vince et al., 2024).

To examine these mechanisms, the paper analyses a reform-sequencing model under democratic stress, characterised by front-loaded fiscal adjustment, exchange-rate liberalisation, and institutional anchoring. While this model is examined through Nigeria’s 2023–2026 reform episode, referred to in domestic discourse as “Tinubunomics,” the focus is not on a leader-specific doctrine, but on a set of mechanisms that may operate in other reforming contexts facing similar constraints.

The analysis is guided by the following research question: How do institutional memory and distributional legitimacy jointly shape reform resilience under democratic stress in Nigeria's 2023–2026 reform sequence? Two sub-questions follow: through what institutional mechanisms does institutional memory strengthen or weaken reform institutionalisation, and how do distributional effects, mitigation credibility, and trust shape acceptance, contestation, and compliance dynamics?

Methodologically, the paper employs theory-testing qualitative process tracing based on systematic analysis of policy documents, triangulated with descriptive organisational data. This approach is appropriate because the causal processes of interest, sequencing, learning, credibility, and contested compliance, are temporally ordered and mechanism-driven, and are not well captured by short-horizon macro correlations. The analysis focuses on identifying causal process observations and evaluating them against rival explanations, including technocratic sufficiency, coercion-based persistence, and exogenous shocks.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it conceptualises reform sequencing under democratic stress as a coherent, mechanism-based model with explicit causal pathways. Second, it integrates institutional memory and distributional legitimacy into a unified explanation of reform durability, bridging implementation-capacity and political-conflict literatures. Third, it provides process-tracing evidence from Nigeria's 2023–2026 reform episode, showing how legitimacy dynamics and institutional routines jointly shape reform resilience under conditions of hostility and complexity.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and identifies the research gaps. Section 3 develops the conceptual model and propositions. Section 4 outlines the research design. Section 5 presents the empirical analysis, and Section 6 discusses the findings and implications.

2. Literature Review

(Conceptual, Theoretical, Empirical, and Research Gaps)

2.1 Conceptual Foundations

Reform sequencing under democratic stress refers to the strategic ordering of policy adjustments such that credibility gains, fiscal space, and institutional anchors are established before distributional backlash overwhelms political capacity. However, the literature

increasingly demonstrates that sequencing is not merely a macroeconomic exercise; it is fundamentally a governance problem. Reforms such as subsidy removal and exchange-rate liberalisation generate immediate and visible distributional effects, particularly in contexts where price transmission into food and transport costs is rapid. As a result, reform sequencing must simultaneously manage economic adjustment and political legitimacy.

In the Nigerian context, this interaction is especially pronounced. Subsidy removal is inseparable from compensation design and reinvestment commitments, as the credibility of mitigation strategies shapes both political sustainability and implementation consistency (Shittu, 2024; Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, 2023). Economy-wide modelling further reinforces this logic, demonstrating that subsidy removal can increase prices and reduce welfare in the absence of compensatory measures (Okorie et al., 2024). These studies establish a clear welfare–legitimacy constraint but do not explain how such constraints are institutionally managed over time.

Institutional anchoring addresses this limitation by shifting analytical attention from policy adoption to policy institutionalisation. It concerns whether reforms are embedded in rules, fiscal flows, and administrative routines that reduce discretion and limit reversal risk. Institutional memory is central to this process: retained knowledge, organisational routines, and learning structures enable governments to sustain complex reforms despite turnover and contestation (Stark, 2019; Stark & Head, 2019). Research on policy integration similarly emphasises that cross-sector reforms depend on coordination and learning routines rather than fragmented implementation (Vince et al., 2024), while administrative network theory highlights that learning is uneven and contingent on institutional supports (Soares et al., 2024). Collectively, these perspectives suggest that reform durability depends not only on policy design, but on the institutionalisation of learning into routinised practice.

Distributional legitimacy constitutes the second conceptual pillar. It refers to the perceived fairness of reforms and the acceptance–contestation dynamics that follow. The literature shows that legitimacy is both material and discursive. Distributive outcomes and mitigation credibility directly shape whether reforms trigger unrest, particularly in contexts of economic vulnerability (Belgioioso et al., 2024; World Bank, 2024; von Uexkull et al., 2024). At the same time, communication and policy framing can influence public support, although their effectiveness is conditional on trust and delivery credibility (Bharadwaj et al., 2024; Bodó, 2022). While this body of work explains why legitimacy matters, it provides limited insight into how legitimacy dynamics translate into institutionalisation outcomes.

These dynamics unfold under conditions of governance hostility, characterised by distrust, insecurity, and constrained state capacity. Such conditions intensify both the political and administrative challenges of reform implementation. At the same time, institutionalisation research cautions that short-term outcomes may obscure whether reforms are becoming embedded in durable routines (Vince et al., 2024). Complexity perspectives further highlight how coordination burdens can overwhelm governance systems, undermining both legitimacy and effectiveness when institutional capacity is limited.

Finally, welfare monitoring introduces a critical temporal dimension. High-frequency data, such as phone surveys tracking food prices, allow for real-time observation of welfare pressures during reform episodes (Olabisi et al., 2025). This is significant because legitimacy is dynamic rather than static, evolving as price shocks propagate through the economy. However, existing research rarely integrates such time-sensitive welfare signals into analyses of reform implementation and institutionalisation.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three complementary theoretical strands: institutional memory theory, political economy of reform, and policy learning and complexity theory. Institutional memory theory explains reform durability in terms of retained knowledge, routines, and organisational continuity. Institutional amnesia—arising from turnover, fragmentation, and organisational change—undermines policy coherence and implementation consistency (Stark, 2019; Stark & Head, 2019). Policy learning research extends this perspective by emphasising that learning is not merely adaptive but generative, shaping both policy innovation and implementation pathways (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024). Effective reform implementation therefore depends on structured learning processes, feedback mechanisms, and coordination arrangements (Vince et al., 2024). Administrative network theory further shows that learning is uneven and must be institutionalised to produce consistent outcomes (Soares et al., 2024). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that reform resilience depends on whether learning is embedded in stable institutional routines and translated into credible commitments.

Political economy theory frames reform as a problem of distributional conflict. Subsidy reforms are particularly contentious because their costs are immediate, visible, and broadly distributed, while benefits are often delayed or uncertain. Empirical evidence linking price increases to protest onset supports the expectation that contestation is endogenous to reform processes (von Uexkull et al., 2024). Distributive justice research further demonstrates

that perceived unfairness significantly increases the likelihood of unrest (Belgioioso et al., 2024). In this context, distributional legitimacy functions as both a constraint and an outcome: reforms that generate visible welfare losses without credible mitigation are more likely to trigger resistance and undermine compliance. Trust conditions these dynamics, as communication alone is insufficient in low-trust environments (Bharadwaj et al., 2024; Bodó, 2022).

Policy learning and complexity theory explain why reforms may fail even when policy objectives are clear. Learning depends on feedback, evaluation, and institutional capacity, while complexity increases coordination demands and the risk of implementation failure. When reforms span multiple sectors, weak coordination can generate fragmentation and policy drift. Institutionalisation is therefore inherently fragile: reforms may produce short-term outcomes without becoming embedded in durable governance arrangements unless supported by sustained coordination and learning (Vince et al., 2024).

Taken together, these theoretical strands suggest that reform durability is best understood as an interaction between institutional capacity (memory and learning) and political legitimacy (distributional acceptance and trust), rather than as a function of policy design alone.

2.3 Empirical Evidence

Empirical research relevant to this study can be organised into four interrelated strands. First, subsidy incidence and welfare transmission studies demonstrate that fuel subsidies are not necessarily pro-poor and may disproportionately benefit higher-income groups (Soile et al., 2015). However, their removal generates broad-based welfare pressures through price pass-through effects. Nigeria-focused modelling confirms that subsidy removal can increase prices and reduce welfare unless accompanied by compensatory measures (Okorie et al., 2024), while policy analyses emphasise the importance of credible compensation and reinvestment strategies (Shittu, 2024). This literature establishes the distributional stakes of reform but does not explain how these pressures are institutionally managed over time.

Second, research on legitimacy and support formation shows that public acceptance is shaped by the interaction between material outcomes and perceived fairness. Distributive justice studies demonstrate that perceived unfairness significantly increases the likelihood of unrest following subsidy reforms (Belgioioso et al., 2024), while empirical and experimental evidence indicates that communication and framing can influence public support, conditional

on trust and policy credibility (Bharadwaj et al., 2024; Bodó, 2022). This suggests that legitimacy is jointly produced through narrative and material delivery, yet the mechanisms linking these dynamics to institutionalisation remain underexplored.

Third, studies of contestation highlight the centrality of political mobilisation in reform processes. Cross-national evidence linking fuel price increases to protest onset indicates that contestation is causally embedded in reform trajectories (von Uexkull et al., 2024). This implies that reform durability cannot be understood independently of protest dynamics and compliance behaviour. However, the literature provides limited insight into how governments sustain policy continuity under such conditions of contestation.

Fourth, research on institutional memory and policy learning provides insight into implementation dynamics. Institutional amnesia undermines continuity and increases the likelihood of policy inconsistency (Stark, 2019; Stark & Head, 2019), while coordination and learning routines support institutionalisation (Vince et al., 2024; Soares et al., 2024). Policy learning research further emphasises that durability depends on how learning is structured and institutionalised (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024). However, these insights are rarely integrated with political economy analyses of reform under conditions of hostility and contestation.

Finally, welfare monitoring research introduces a temporal dimension to reform analysis. High-frequency data capture real-time welfare pressures (Olabisi et al., 2025), offering a means of linking distributional shocks with legitimacy dynamics and policy responses. Yet this approach remains underutilised in studies of reform sequencing and institutionalisation.

2.4 Research Gaps and Contribution

Despite substantial research, four key gaps remain. First, the literature largely treats reforms as discrete policy actions rather than as coherent sequences with shared mechanisms. While Nigeria-focused studies examine subsidy removal and welfare effects (Shittu, 2024; Okorie et al., 2024), they rarely conceptualise reform clusters as unified processes. This paper addresses this gap by framing reform sequencing as a mechanism-based model.

Second, while existing research explains contestation and support formation (Belgioioso et al., 2024; Bharadwaj et al., 2024; von Uexkull et al., 2024), it does not adequately explain how legitimacy dynamics translate into institutionalisation outcomes. This motivates the paper's treatment of distributional legitimacy as a conditioning mechanism shaping reform resilience.

Third, institutional memory and policy learning theories explain implementation capacity (Stark, 2019; Vince et al., 2024; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024), but are rarely integrated into political economy analyses of reform under hostile conditions. This creates a divide between capacity-based and conflict-based explanations. The paper bridges this divide by linking institutional memory directly to reform resilience.

Fourth, existing empirical work relies heavily on aggregate indicators, while high-frequency welfare monitoring offers more precise insight into evolving legitimacy dynamics during reform implementation (Olabisi et al., 2025). This paper incorporates such time-sensitive evidence into a process-tracing framework.

Taken together, these gaps motivate a mechanism-based analysis of reform sequencing under democratic stress, focusing on how institutional memory and distributional legitimacy jointly shape reform resilience in Nigeria's 2023–2026 reform episode.

3. Conceptual Model and Theory: Reform Sequencing, Institutional Memory, Legitimacy, and Resilience

This section develops a mechanism-based framework explaining reform durability under democratic stress. Building on the literature, it conceptualises reform sequencing as a mid-range analytical construct, defines key outcomes, specifies causal mechanisms, and derives testable propositions aligned with process-tracing methodology.

The framework treats reform durability not as a function of policy design alone, but as the outcome of interacting institutional and political mechanisms operating under conditions of distributional stress and governance complexity.

3.1 Reform Sequencing as an Analytical Construct

Reform sequencing under democratic stress is conceptualised as a coherent cluster of interdependent policy adjustments implemented under conditions of fiscal pressure, contested legitimacy, and administrative constraint. In the Nigerian case, this is often referred to as “Tinubunomics,” but here it is treated as an analytical construct rather than a leader-specific doctrine.

The model comprises five interacting components:

1. Front-loaded fiscal adjustment (e.g., subsidy removal)
2. Exchange-rate liberalisation and FX restructuring
3. Institutional revenue restructuring (fiscal anchoring mechanisms)

4. Selective reduction in FX dependence
5. Domestic value-chain expansion (medium-term supply response)

The analytical value of this construct lies in treating reforms as a sequenced system, rather than isolated interventions. To avoid retrospective bundling, the model is considered valid only when three coherence conditions are satisfied:

- **Objective coherence:** reforms are justified as part of a shared stabilisation and credibility-restoration strategy
- **Mechanism coherence:** reforms operate through linked channels (credibility, pass-through, coordination, compliance)
- **Sequencing coherence:** observable ordering exists (shock → anchoring → adaptation)

This approach aligns with institutional perspectives emphasising routinisation and credible commitment (Stark, 2019; Stark & Head, 2019) and with policy integration research highlighting coordinated implementation (Vince et al., 2024).

3.2 Core Outcomes

The framework distinguishes two analytically linked outcomes:

Reform Resilience (DV1)

The extent to which reforms become institutionalised, embedded in rules, routines, and coordination structures, and remain resistant to reversal under contestation.

→ A governance and institutional outcome (Stark, 2019; Vince et al., 2024)

Distributional Legitimacy (DV2)

Acceptance–contestation dynamics are shaped by perceived fairness, mitigation credibility, and trust.

→ A political constraint affecting compliance (Bharadwaj et al., 2024; Belgioioso et al., 2024; von Uexkull et al., 2024)

Analytical distinction:

- Legitimacy (DV2) conditions implementation
- Resilience (DV1) captures durability

3.3 Causal Mechanisms

The model specifies two interacting mechanisms linking institutional capacity and political legitimacy to reform outcomes.

3.3.1 Mechanism A: Institutional Memory → Reform Resilience

Causal chain:

Institutional memory

- coordination routines + learning structures
- consistent implementation + credible commitments
- routinisation and rule-embeddedness
- reform resilience (DV1)

Institutional memory refers to retained knowledge, organisational routines, and learning structures. When preserved, it enables governments to implement complex reforms consistently across time and agencies. When absent, institutional amnesia—driven by turnover and fragmentation—produces inconsistency and discretionary drift (Stark, 2019; Stark & Head, 2019).

Policy learning theory reinforces that learning is both adaptive and generative, shaping policy innovation and implementation pathways (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024). Crucially, learning must be institutionalised through coordination mechanisms and organisational routines to produce stable outcomes (Vince et al., 2024; Soares et al., 2024). Empirical work on institutional memory further demonstrates that policy durability depends on how knowledge is retained and mobilised within governance systems (Stark, 2019).

From a broader public policy perspective, governance capacity is shaped by the ability of institutions to manage complexity, coordinate across actors, and sustain coherent policy trajectories over time (Peters, 2015). This reinforces the view that institutional memory is not merely informational but organisational and systemic.

Implication: Reform resilience depends on whether learning is retained, coordinated, and routinised into institutional practice.

3.3.2 Mechanism B: Distributional Legitimacy → Compliance → Reform Resilience

Causal chain:

Distributional effects + mitigation credibility + trust

- perceived fairness
- acceptance or contestation (DV2)
- compliance or resistance
- pressure on implementation
- reform resilience (DV1)

Reform sequencing generates predictable welfare pressures through price pass-through effects. Evidence shows that subsidy removal increases prices and reduces welfare in the absence of compensatory measures (Okorie et al., 2024), while incidence studies

demonstrate that even regressive subsidies create politically salient losses when removed (Soile et al., 2015).

Distributive justice research shows that perceived unfairness increases the likelihood of unrest (Belgioioso et al., 2024), while cross-national evidence links fuel price increases to protest onset (von Uexkull et al., 2024). Communication can shape support, but only conditionally on trust and delivery credibility (Bharadwaj et al., 2024; Bodó, 2022).

From a policy perspective, managing distributional consequences is central to sustaining reform legitimacy, particularly where administrative capacity and trust are constrained (Peters, 2015).

Implication: Distributional legitimacy determines whether reforms generate compliance or resistance, thereby conditioning institutionalisation.

3.3.3 Integrated Mechanism Logic

Reform resilience emerges only when both mechanisms operate jointly:

- Institutional memory ensures implementation capacity and consistency
- Distributional legitimacy sustains political acceptance and compliance

Failure in either mechanism produces fragility:

- Weak institutional memory → implementation breakdown
- Weak legitimacy → contestation and reversal pressure

3.4 Propositions (Process-Tracing Ready)

P1: Institutional Memory → Resilience

Reform resilience increases where institutional memory is preserved and mobilised through routinised procedures, coordination structures, and learning systems, enabling consistent implementation and reducing discretionary reversal (Stark, 2019; Vince et al., 2024; Soares et al., 2024; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024).

P2: Distributional Stress → Legitimacy Constraint

Distributional legitimacy declines when welfare losses are visible and mitigation credibility is weak, increasing contestation and reducing compliance, thereby weakening reform resilience (Okorie et al., 2024; Belgioioso et al., 2024; von Uexkull et al., 2024).

P3: Conditional Communication Effect

Communication and fairness framing increase support only when trust and delivery credibility are sufficient; under low trust, narratives lose effectiveness, reducing legitimacy and indirectly constraining reform resilience (Bharadwaj et al., 2024; Bodó, 2022).

P4: Governance Capacity and Coordination Constraint

Limited governance capacity and weak policy integration increase implementation fragmentation and coordination failure, reducing reform resilience unless learning routines and coordination mechanisms are institutionalised (Peters, 2015; Vince et al., 2024; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024).

3.5 Observable Implications (Process Tracing Alignment)

The propositions generate observable implications suitable for process tracing:

- **P1:** Evidence of routinisation (stable rules, institutional continuity, coordination structures)
- **P2:** Temporal alignment between welfare shocks and contestation signals
- **P3:** Variation in communication effectiveness conditional on trust and delivery outcomes
- **P4:** Evidence of either coordination success (integration) or fragmentation under capacity constraints

These observable implications guide the empirical analysis by identifying causal process observations that distinguish between competing explanations, including technocratic sufficiency and coercion-based persistence.

4. Methods: Theory-Testing Process Tracing

4.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study employs a theory-testing process-tracing design to examine Nigeria's 2023–2026 reform sequence. The approach is appropriate given the paper's focus on causal mechanisms, specifically how institutional memory and distributional legitimacy jointly shape reform resilience under conditions of democratic stress.

Process tracing enables within-case causal inference by assessing whether empirical evidence aligns with theoretically specified mechanisms and whether alternative explanations can account for observed outcomes. The analysis evaluates whether the sequences and interactions implied by propositions P1–P4 are observable, temporally ordered, and consistent with the hypothesised causal chains (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024; Vince et al., 2024).

Nigeria is selected as a crucial and theory-relevant case. The 2023–2026 reform episode combines front-loaded price reforms, high distributional salience, contested legitimacy, and significant coordination constraints. These conditions make reform durability uncertain and therefore provide strong leverage for testing mechanism-based explanations (von Uexkull et al., 2024; Belgioioso et al., 2024).

The objective is analytical generalisation rather than statistical inference. The findings are intended to inform theory on reform sequencing under democratic stress in contexts characterised by resource dependence, high pass-through effects, and governance constraints (Stark, 2019; Peters, 2015; Vince et al., 2024).

4.2 Data and Evidence Base

The analysis draws on two complementary sources of evidence. First, a structured corpus of policy and institutional documents is used to capture formal rules, policy intent, and implementation procedures. These include fiscal policy statements, budget instruments, petroleum-sector directives, central bank circulars, monetary policy communications, and mitigation programme guidelines.

Second, time-aligned descriptive indicators are used for triangulation. These include inflation series, food price indices, and publicly reported programme indicators. High-frequency food price data are particularly important for identifying the timing and intensity of welfare pressures associated with reform shocks (Olabisi et al., 2025).

Documents are included where they meet three criteria: they fall within the study period (May 2023–Q1 2026), relate directly to at least one component of the reform sequence, and contain operational content such as rules, procedures, or implementation guidance. Quantitative indicators are used descriptively to contextualise welfare dynamics and legitimacy pressures rather than to estimate causal macroeconomic effects (Okorie et al., 2024; Shittu, 2024).

4.3 Operationalisation of Outcomes

The analysis focuses on two dependent variables: reform resilience (DV1) and distributional legitimacy (DV2).

Reform resilience is defined as the degree to which reforms become institutionalised. It is operationalised through observable indicators of rule-embeddedness, implementation continuity, coordination stability, and resistance to reversal. This reflects an institutional definition of durability grounded in routinisation and sustained coordination (Stark, 2019; Vince et al., 2024).

Distributional legitimacy is defined as the acceptance–contestation dynamics shaped by perceived fairness, mitigation credibility, and trust. It is operationalised through contestation signals such as protests and resistance indicators, the delivery and visibility of mitigation measures, fairness framing in policy communication, and the alignment between policy claims and observable outcomes. Distributional legitimacy is treated both as an

outcome variable and as a conditioning mechanism affecting compliance and implementation (Bharadwaj et al., 2024; Belgioioso et al., 2024; Bodó, 2022).

4.4 Causal Inference Strategy: Process-Tracing Logic

Causal inference proceeds through the identification and evaluation of causal process observations (CPOs), defined as within-case evidence that provides leverage for assessing whether hypothesised mechanisms are operating. The analysis applies standard process-tracing tests with varying inferential strength, including hoop tests, smoking-gun tests, and straw-in-the-wind tests. Hoop tests assess necessary conditions, such that failure weakens the hypothesis. Smoking-gun tests provide strong confirmatory evidence when present, while straw-in-the-wind tests offer suggestive but non-decisive support.

CPOs are identified along three dimensions: the sequencing and coherence of reforms, mechanism-specific signals corresponding to propositions P1–P4, and observable outcomes related to reform resilience and distributional legitimacy. Particular inferential weight is assigned to evidence of routinisation and rule codification for P1, mitigation delivery and welfare responses for P2, communication–trust alignment for P3, and coordination and integration signals for P4.

This approach ensures that causal claims are grounded in theory-driven evidence evaluation rather than descriptive narrative (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024; Vince et al., 2024).

Table 1. Process-Tracing Test Matrix: Critical Junctures, Causal Process Observations, and Proposition-Level Inference

To operationalise the process-tracing strategy, the analysis employs a structured test matrix (Table 1), which maps critical junctures in the reform sequence to specific causal process observations (CPOs), process-tracing test types (hoop, smoking gun, straw-in-the-wind), and proposition-level expectations (P1–P4). The table functions as an inferential device rather than a descriptive summary: it specifies *ex ante* what evidence would support, weaken, or falsify each mechanism at different stages of the reform sequence.

By aligning each juncture with theoretically derived expectations and evidentiary thresholds, the table reduces interpretive flexibility and strengthens causal inference. In particular, observations classified as smoking-gun tests (e.g., evidence of routinised procedures or traceable mitigation delivery) provide strong confirmation of mechanism operation, while failed hoop tests (e.g., absence of coordination or rule-embeddedness where required) weaken the plausibility of the corresponding propositions. This structured approach

ensures that empirical analysis is guided by theory-driven expectations rather than post hoc narrative interpretation (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024; Vince et al., 2024).

Table 1. Critical Junctures, Causal Process Observations, and Proposition Tests

Juncture	Period	Reform Shift	Key CPOs (Evidence)	Mechanism Interpretation	Test Type	Proposition Signal	DV Implication
J1: Fiscal Shock & Initial Legitimacy Test	Q2–Q3 2023	Subsidy withdrawal + fiscal reset	Policy justification framing; mitigation design specificity; early price pressure indicators	Front-loaded welfare shock activates legitimacy constraint; mitigation credibility becomes binding	Hoop (P2); Straw (P3)	Supports P2; conditional P3	DV2 volatile; DV1 indeterminate (dependent on rule-embedding)
J2: FX Liberalisation under Stress	Q3–Q4 2023	FX restructuring layered on shock	FX rule codification; policy consistency vs oscillation; fiscal–monetary coordination signals	Complexity increases coordination burden; codification signals institutional anchoring vs drift	Hoop (P4); Straw (P1)	Supports P4; conditional P1	DV2 pressure intensifies; DV1 depends on rule stability
J3: Mitigation & Credible Commitment Phase	Q4 2023– Q2 2024	Transition from announcement to delivery	Traceable mitigation delivery; reinvestment transparency; administrative routines	Delivery routines convert intent into credibility; absence weakens legitimacy and institutionalisation	Smoking gun (P1/P2 if present)	Supports P1/P2 if routinised; otherwise weakens	DV1 strengthens with routines; DV2 stabilises if credible
J4: Welfare	Mid-20	Sustained	High-frequency	Persistent welfare	Hoop (P2);	Strong	DV2

Stress Consolidation	24	food/systemic price pressure	food price signals; adaptive policy responses; contestation indicators	stress tightens legitimacy constraint; adaptation indicates learning capacity	Straw (P1)	support P2; conditional P1	deteriorates without adaptation; DV1 tested
J5: Institutional Anchoring vs Drift	Late 2024–2025	Codification and learning under complexity	Rule-embeddedness; learning loops; discretionary waivers vs stability	Institutional memory predicts resilience via routinisation; complexity predicts drift if integration weak	Smoking gun (P1/P4)	Supports P1 if codified; supports P4 if fragmented	DV1 increases with codification; DV2 depends on performance
J6: Hostility Stress Test	2025–early 2026	Reform persistence under insecurity	Implementation continuity; trust signals; adaptive mitigation under stress	Persistence under hostility indicates institutionalisation rather than rhetorical commitment	Hoop (P1); Straw against alternatives	Reinforces P1; supports P2/P3 under stress	DV1 confirmed if stable; DV2 tied to delivery not messaging

4.5 Structured Test Matrix and Critical Junctures

To operationalise inference, the study employs a structured process-tracing test matrix (Table 1) that maps critical reform junctures, expected causal process observations, test types, and proposition-level expectations. The matrix functions as an *ex ante* inferential framework specifying what evidence would support, weaken, or falsify each mechanism.

By aligning empirical analysis with theoretically derived expectations, this approach reduces interpretive flexibility and strengthens causal inference. It ensures that conclusions are based on pre-specified criteria rather than post hoc interpretation.

4.6 Temporal Structuring: Critical Junctures

The empirical analysis is organised around critical junctures, defined as periods in which reform dynamics shift and causal mechanisms are expected to activate, interact, or fail. This temporal structuring enables sequencing analysis, facilitates the identification of feedback and adaptation processes, and allows for the evaluation of mechanism activation over time.

The approach is consistent with policy learning theory, which emphasises feedback loops, adaptation, and evolving institutional responses in complex policy environments (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024).

4.7 Triangulation and Rival Explanations

Inference is strengthened through systematic triangulation and explicit evaluation of alternative explanations. Triangulation operates through cross-document validation, data alignment between policy events and welfare indicators, and theory-consistent coding that ensures uniform application of mechanism logic.

At the same time, the analysis evaluates several rival explanations, including technocratic sufficiency, coercion-based persistence, exogenous shocks, and coordination failure independent of legitimacy. Mechanism-based explanations are supported where observed evidence aligns with predicted causal processes and cannot be explained by these alternatives.

Negative evidence, such as the absence of routinisation or weak mitigation delivery, is treated as disconfirming and contributes to strengthening inferential rigor (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024; Soares et al., 2024).

4.8 Limitations

The study is subject to limitations associated with document-based analysis, including potential bias in official narratives and incomplete observability of public perceptions. These

limitations are mitigated through triangulation across sources, structured and theory-driven coding, and reliance on observable indicators of contestation and welfare pressure.

The scope of inference is limited to institutionalisation and legitimacy mechanisms. The analysis does not attempt to estimate short-run macroeconomic effects or to attribute aggregate outcomes to specific policy components.

5. Empirical Analysis: Mechanism Activation Across Critical Junctures

The empirical analysis evaluates propositions P1–P4 through theory-testing process tracing structured across six critical junctures. Following the inferential framework specified in Table 1, each juncture is examined in terms of causal process observations (CPOs), their evidentiary strength, and their implications for distributional legitimacy (DV2) and reform resilience (DV1). The analysis distinguishes between observed evidence and mechanism-consistent interpretation, assessing whether each observation confirms, weakens, or remains indeterminate with respect to the hypothesised mechanisms.

5.1 Fiscal Shock and Initial Legitimacy Constraint

The first juncture constitutes a hoop test for Proposition 2, which predicts that front-loaded welfare shocks will activate distributional legitimacy constraints. The empirical record shows immediate and visible price pass-through effects following subsidy withdrawal, with rising transport and food costs generating early welfare pressures. At the same time, policy communication emphasised the necessity of reform, but mitigation mechanisms remained only partially specified.

This combination of observable welfare shock and incomplete mitigation credibility constitutes a causal process observation consistent with the activation of the legitimacy mechanism. Existing modelling and policy analyses predict precisely such outcomes, whereby subsidy removal generates economy-wide price increases and welfare losses in the absence of credible compensatory measures (Okorie et al., 2024; Shittu, 2024). The presence of these conditions satisfies the necessary expectations of a hoop test for P2.

The inference drawn is that distributional legitimacy (DV2) is destabilised at the outset of the reform sequence. Cross-national evidence linking fuel price increases to protest onset further strengthens the plausibility of contestation dynamics emerging at this stage (von Uexkull et al., 2024; Belgioioso et al., 2024). However, reform resilience (DV1) remains indeterminate at this point, as institutionalisation depends on subsequent developments in rule-embedding and coordination.

5.2 FX Liberalisation and Coordination Stress

The second juncture constitutes a hoop test for Proposition 4, which anticipates that layered reforms increase governance complexity and place pressure on coordination capacity. The evidence indicates that foreign exchange restructuring occurred alongside ongoing welfare pressures, producing a compounded reform environment. Signals of rule adjustment and policy calibration are observable, but coordination between fiscal and monetary authorities remains uneven, with indications of policy oscillation.

These observations are consistent with a complexity-induced coordination burden, where multiple reform components interact without fully stabilised integration mechanisms. From a process-tracing perspective, the presence of coordination strain satisfies the necessary condition for P4, indicating that governance capacity is being tested under conditions of reform layering (Vince et al., 2024; Peters, 2015).

The implication is that distributional legitimacy (DV2) comes under increased pressure due to compounded welfare effects, while reform resilience (DV1) becomes contingent on whether coordination stabilises through rule codification or deteriorates into discretionary adjustment. At this stage, evidence supports P4 but does not yet establish whether integration capacity is sufficient to sustain institutionalisation.

5.3 Mitigation Delivery and Credible Commitment

The third juncture provides potential smoking-gun evidence for the interaction between Propositions 1 and 2, depending on whether mitigation transitions from policy intent to routinised implementation. The empirical record shows an increased emphasis on mitigation delivery, including programme rollout and reinvestment signalling. Crucially, where mitigation becomes traceable and embedded within administrative routines, a shift from declarative policy to operational implementation is observable.

The presence of routinised mitigation procedures constitutes a smoking-gun observation for P1, as it provides strong evidence that institutional memory is being mobilised through coordination routines and learning structures. This aligns with theoretical expectations that institutionalisation depends on the conversion of policy intent into stable procedures (Stark, 2019; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024). At the same time, improved mitigation credibility reduces legitimacy volatility, providing supporting evidence for P2.

However, the evidentiary strength of this juncture is conditional. Where mitigation remains fragmented or lacks procedural clarity, the absence of routinisation weakens both mechanisms. This variation highlights the importance of administrative embedding as the link between policy design and both legitimacy and resilience outcomes.

The implication is that reform resilience (DV1) strengthens where routinisation is observable, while distributional legitimacy (DV2) stabilises where mitigation credibility improves. Where these conditions are absent, both variables remain fragile.

5.4 Welfare Stress Consolidation and Legitimacy Pressure

The fourth juncture constitutes a renewed hoop test for Proposition 2, as sustained welfare pressure is expected to reinforce legitimacy constraints. The evidence shows continued elevation of food inflation and cost-of-living pressures, consistent with high-frequency welfare indicators and CPI trends throughout 2024. Contestation signals and adaptive policy responses are observable, indicating persistent pressure on reform legitimacy.

These observations provide strong support for the continued operation of the legitimacy mechanism. The persistence of welfare stress aligns with both Nigeria-specific modelling and broader empirical findings linking economic shocks to political contestation (Okorie et al., 2024; von Uexkull et al., 2024). The temporal alignment between welfare pressures and contestation signals constitutes a robust causal process observation reinforcing P2.

The implication is that distributional legitimacy (DV2) remains under sustained pressure. At this stage, reform resilience (DV1) is actively tested, as the ability of institutional routines to absorb legitimacy shocks becomes critical to preventing policy reversal.

5.5 Institutional Anchoring versus Drift

The fifth juncture provides smoking-gun conditions for both Proposition 1 and Proposition 4, as codification and learning should either stabilise reforms or reveal fragmentation under complexity. The evidence shows increasing codification of policy rules, including formalisation of governance procedures and the emergence of more stable, rule-based instruments. Coordination signals improve relative to earlier stages, suggesting a shift toward routinised implementation.

The presence of codified rule regimes and sustained coordination constitutes smoking-gun evidence for P1, indicating that institutional memory has been successfully embedded in governance structures. This supports the mechanism linking learning and coordination to reform resilience (Stark, 2019; Vince et al., 2024). At the same time, the observed improvement in integration capacity suggests that complexity is being managed rather than producing fragmentation, providing conditional support for P4 within a strengthened governance context (Peters, 2015; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024).

The implication is that reform resilience (DV1) increases through rule-embeddedness and coordination stability. Distributional legitimacy (DV2) becomes less volatile where institutional performance reinforces credibility, although it remains contingent on continued delivery.

5.6 Persistence under Hostility

The final juncture constitutes a critical hoop test for Proposition 1, as reform persistence under hostile conditions requires institutionalisation rather than episodic commitment. The evidence indicates continued implementation despite insecurity, distrust, and political pressure. Reform persistence is associated with sustained coordination routines and adaptive mitigation responses rather than ad hoc enforcement.

This persistence constitutes strong evidence that institutional memory has been sufficiently embedded to sustain reform implementation. From a process-tracing perspective, the continuation of reforms under adverse conditions is difficult to reconcile with alternative explanations based solely on coercion or technocratic sufficiency. Instead, it is consistent with a mechanism in which routinised governance structures support continuity (Bodó, 2022).

The implication is that reform resilience (DV1) is confirmed where stability and continuity are observed. Distributional legitimacy (DV2) remains conditional on delivery credibility rather than communication alone, reinforcing the interaction between institutional and political mechanisms.

5.7 Cross-Juncture Synthesis

Across the six junctures, the pattern of causal process observations aligns closely with the expectations specified in the theoretical framework and test matrix. The strongest and most consistent evidence is observed for Proposition 2 in the early stages of reform, where welfare shocks activate legitimacy constraints, and for Proposition 1 in later stages, where institutional memory becomes embedded through routinisation and codification.

Proposition 3 receives conditional support, as communication effects are shown to depend on trust and delivery credibility rather than operating independently (Bharadwaj et al., 2024; Bodó, 2022). Proposition 4 is supported in the early phases through evidence of coordination strain but is subsequently mitigated as integration capacity improves (Peters, 2015; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024).

Taken together, the evidence supports a mechanism-based explanation in which reform resilience emerges from the interaction between institutional memory and

distributional legitimacy. Reform durability is not determined by policy design alone but by the extent to which institutional capacity and legitimacy constraints are jointly managed over time.

6. Discussion: Reform Durability under Democratic Stress

This paper set out to explain why reform sequences implemented under democratic stress sometimes become institutionalised and resilient, while similar episodes fragment into inconsistency or reversal. The findings support a mechanism-based interpretation of reform durability, in which outcomes are not determined by policy design alone but by the interaction between distributional legitimacy and institutional memory.

Rather than treating Tinubunomics as a descriptive label, the analysis demonstrates that it operates as a sequenced reform model whose trajectory is shaped by two interdependent constraints. First, front-loaded reforms generate immediate distributional pressures that activate legitimacy dynamics consistent with protest and distributive justice research (von Uexkull et al., 2024; Belgioioso et al., 2024). Second, the translation of reform decisions into durable outcomes depends on whether institutional routines, rule systems, and coordination structures are established and sustained over time (Stark, 2019; Vince et al., 2024). Reform durability therefore emerges not from policy choice alone, but from whether political decisions are successfully converted into routinised institutional practice.

This finding reframes a central assumption in the political economy of reform. Much of the literature evaluates reforms in terms of technical correctness or immediate macroeconomic outcomes. The evidence here suggests that such approaches are incomplete. Reforms should instead be understood as institutional processes whose success depends on whether governance systems can sustain implementation under conditions of legitimacy pressure and coordination complexity. In this sense, reform sequencing is not simply about ordering policies, but about managing the interaction between welfare shocks, compliance dynamics, and institutional capacity over time.

6.1 Theoretical Implications: Linking Legitimacy and Institutionalisation

The findings contribute to three strands of literature by clarifying how mechanisms operate jointly rather than in isolation. First, the paper extends the subsidy reform and political economy literature by demonstrating that distributional legitimacy is not only an outcome but a causal constraint on institutionalisation. Existing work shows that subsidy removal generates welfare pressures and contestation (Soile et al., 2015; Okorie et al., 2024)

and that fairness perceptions influence unrest risk (Belgioioso et al., 2024; von Uexkull et al., 2024). This paper adds that legitimacy dynamics shape the feasible set of implementation choices. Contestation reduces compliance, which in turn constrains the extent to which reforms can be embedded without dilution or reversal. Political difficulty therefore, does not merely accompany reform; it actively structures its institutional trajectory.

Second, the paper contributes to institutional memory and policy learning research by specifying how memory translates into resilience under political stress. Institutional memory theory emphasises continuity and retained knowledge (Stark, 2019; Stark & Head, 2019), while policy learning research highlights the role of feedback, adaptation, and coordination (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024; Vince et al., 2024; Soares et al., 2024). The findings show that these factors matter through their capacity to convert policy decisions into credible, rule-based commitments under hostile conditions. Institutional memory is therefore observable not as an abstract attribute, but as codified rules, stable coordination mechanisms, and feedback loops that reduce discretionary drift and sustain implementation.

Third, the paper advances debates on governance complexity by demonstrating that complexity operates as an interactive condition rather than a deterministic constraint. Complexity increases coordination demands and amplifies the risk of implementation failure, particularly when institutional capacity is weak (Peters, 2015). However, the evidence shows that complexity becomes destabilising only when institutional memory and legitimacy are simultaneously strained. Where coordination routines and learning structures are strengthened, complexity can be managed rather than producing fragmentation (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024). This shifts the analytical focus from whether complexity undermines reform to when and how it does so.

6.2 Reform under Democratic Stress: Revisiting Front-Loaded Adjustment

The findings also contribute to debates on the feasibility of front-loaded adjustment in democratic settings. Rather than treating “shock therapy” as inherently unstable, the evidence suggests that its viability is conditional on the credibility of mitigation and the presence of institutional anchoring.

Front-loaded reforms generate rapid and visible welfare effects, which activate legitimacy constraints. However, these shocks are not necessarily destabilising if accompanied by credible compensation and routinised implementation mechanisms that reduce uncertainty and signal fairness (Belgioioso et al., 2024; Bharadwaj et al., 2024). This

aligns with evidence that public support can be shaped, but only within the limits imposed by trust and delivery credibility (Bharadwaj et al., 2024; Bodó, 2022).

The implication is a shift in how reform feasibility is conceptualised. The relevant question is not whether reforms impose costs, but whether governments can sequence, mitigate, and institutionalise reforms in ways that prevent welfare shocks from translating into sustained legitimacy collapse. This reframing places social protection and institutional anchoring at the centre of reform design rather than treating them as secondary considerations (Shittu, 2024; Okorie et al., 2024).

6.3 Evaluating Rival Explanations

The mechanism-based account provides a better fit to the observed evidence than several alternative explanations.

Technocratic sufficiency assumes that correct policy design is sufficient for stable implementation. The findings challenge this view. Welfare shocks and legitimacy dynamics remain central even where policies are technically sound, and outcomes depend on mitigation credibility and institutional embedding rather than design alone (Okorie et al., 2024; Shittu, 2024).

Coercion-based explanations suggest that reforms persist through enforcement capacity. However, the evidence indicates that persistence is associated with routinisation and coordination rather than enforcement alone. Trust and compliance remain central, and coercion does not generate the institutional signatures associated with durable reform (Bodó, 2022).

Exogenous shock explanations account for short-run fluctuations but do not explain the emergence of internal governance structures. External shocks may alter constraints, but they do not produce institutional memory, coordination routines, or rule-embeddedness (Stark & Head, 2019; Vince et al., 2024).

Complexity-based explanations offer a more plausible rival, given the multi-layered nature of the reform sequence. However, the evidence shows that complexity alone is insufficient to explain outcomes. Its effects depend on whether institutional memory and integration capacity are present. Complexity amplifies fragility under weak coordination but can be absorbed where learning and routinisation are strong (Peters, 2015; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024).

Taken together, these comparisons support a joint-mechanism explanation in which reform durability depends on the interaction between legitimacy constraints and institutional capacity.

6.4 Generalisability and Scope Conditions

The findings are derived from a single case, but the mechanisms identified are not case-specific. The argument is most applicable to contexts characterised by resource dependence, rapid price pass-through from reform shocks, contested legitimacy, low trust, and high coordination demands across policy domains.

In such settings, reform sequences are likely to activate legitimacy constraints early, and durability will depend on whether institutional memory and integration capacity enable routinisation (Stark, 2019; Peters, 2015; Vince et al., 2024). What does not travel directly are the specific institutional configurations and political dynamics of the Nigerian case. The contribution is therefore mechanistic rather than descriptive: it provides a framework for analysing how legitimacy and institutional memory interact to shape reform outcomes under democratic stress.

6.5 Implications for Development Governance

The findings suggest several implications for reform design and governance. First, mitigation should be understood as a credibility mechanism. Compensation and reinvestment are not ancillary but central to sustaining legitimacy and compliance (Okorie et al., 2024; Shittu, 2024).

Second, institutional memory must be built early in the reform sequence. Routinised coordination, documentation, and feedback systems are what convert policy decisions into durable outcomes, particularly under hostile conditions (Stark, 2019; Vince et al., 2024).

Third, high-frequency welfare monitoring should be integrated into governance systems. Real-time signals of welfare stress enable adaptive responses that can stabilise legitimacy during reform shocks (Olabisi et al., 2025).

Fourth, complexity must be actively managed through policy integration. Layered reforms increase coordination burdens, and resilience depends on whether integration capacity and learning routines are strengthened rather than allowing fragmentation (Peters, 2015; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024).

6.6 Limits and Future Research

The study is bounded by the logic of the theory-testing process tracing. The objective is not statistical generalisation but the identification of mechanism-consistent evidence that can inform analysis in comparable settings (Vince et al., 2024; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2024).

Future research should extend this framework through comparative process tracing across reform episodes and through deeper organisational analysis of institutional memory, including how routines, staffing, and feedback systems evolve over time (Soares et al., 2024). These directions follow directly from the central finding: reform durability depends not on policy design alone, but on the institutional and legitimacy mechanisms that sustain implementation under conditions of democratic stress.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined a central question in political economy and development governance: why do some reform sequences implemented under democratic stress become institutionalised and resilient, while others fragment or reverse? Using Nigeria's 2023–2026 reform episode as a theory-testing case, the analysis demonstrates that reform durability is best understood as the outcome of interacting mechanisms rather than policy design alone. In doing so, the paper shifts attention from what reforms are adopted to how they are sustained under conditions of distributional pressure, political contestation, and governance complexity.

The findings show that reform resilience emerges from the joint operation of distributional legitimacy and institutional memory. Front-loaded reforms generate immediate welfare pressures that activate legitimacy constraints, shaping contestation, compliance, and the political space available for implementation. At the same time, the capacity to convert policy decisions into durable outcomes depends on whether reforms are embedded in rules, routines, and coordination structures that reduce discretion and enable continuity. Where legitimacy is destabilised or institutional memory is weak, reforms remain vulnerable to inconsistency, discretionary drift, and reversal. Where both mechanisms are sufficiently developed, reforms are more likely to persist as routinised institutional arrangements.

This interpretation carries broader implications for how reform processes are conceptualised. Rather than viewing reform success as a function of technical correctness or macroeconomic outcomes, the analysis suggests that reform durability is fundamentally an institutional and political achievement. Policy design may determine initial conditions, but it does not determine outcomes. Instead, outcomes depend on whether governance systems can sustain implementation in the face of distributional shocks and coordination demands.

Reform sequencing, therefore, is not simply about ordering policies, but about managing the interaction between welfare effects, legitimacy dynamics, and institutional capacity over time.

The paper advances the literature in three principal ways. First, it reconceptualises distributional politics as a causal mechanism of institutionalisation rather than an external constraint. Existing research has demonstrated that subsidy reforms generate welfare pressures and contestation, but has typically treated these dynamics as obstacles to reform. This paper shows that legitimacy dynamics actively structure the trajectory of institutionalisation by shaping compliance and constraining the feasible set of implementation strategies. Distributional legitimacy is thus not peripheral to reform processes; it is constitutive of them.

Second, the paper specifies how institutional memory operates in practice under conditions of political stress. Rather than treating institutional capacity as an abstract attribute, the analysis demonstrates that institutional memory is observable through codified rules, stable coordination arrangements, and learning routines that translate policy decisions into credible commitments. This clarifies the micro-foundations of reform resilience and bridges a gap between institutional theory and empirical analyses of reform implementation.

Third, the paper contributes to debates on governance complexity by showing that complexity is not inherently destabilising but becomes so under specific conditions. Complexity increases coordination demands and amplifies the risk of implementation failure, but its effects depend on the interaction between institutional capacity and legitimacy constraints. Where coordination routines and learning structures are weak, complexity produces fragmentation and drift. Where they are strong, complexity can be absorbed and managed. This reframes complexity from a structural constraint to a conditional factor mediated by institutional and political mechanisms.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the analysis has important implications for development policy and reform practice. In contexts characterised by resource dependence, rapid price pass-through, contested legitimacy, and high coordination demands, reform durability is unlikely to be achieved through policy correctness alone. Governments must simultaneously manage distributional effects, build institutional capacity, and sustain coordination across policy domains. This implies a shift in reform design from a focus on discrete policy instruments to a broader concern with governance architecture.

Three practical implications follow. First, mitigation should be understood as a credibility mechanism rather than an ancillary component of reform. Compensation and reinvestment strategies shape perceptions of fairness and directly influence compliance dynamics, making them central to sustaining legitimacy. Second, institutional memory must be built early in the reform sequence through routinised coordination, documentation, and feedback systems. These elements are what convert policy decisions into durable institutional practices, particularly under conditions of political contestation. Third, high-frequency welfare monitoring should be integrated into governance systems to enable adaptive responses to emerging distributional pressures. Such monitoring provides real-time signals that can inform policy adjustment and stabilise legitimacy during periods of reform-induced stress.

More broadly, the findings suggest that reform packages must be designed with integration capacity in mind. Layered reforms increase coordination burdens, and without corresponding investments in policy integration and learning systems, complexity is likely to generate fragmentation rather than resilience. Reform sequencing, therefore, requires not only attention to timing and ordering, but also to the institutional conditions that enable coordination and adaptation.

The study is subject to limitations associated with its single-case design and reliance on document-based evidence. Its claims are therefore bounded to contexts that share similar structural characteristics, including high exposure to distributional shocks and significant governance constraints. However, the contribution of the paper is mechanistic rather than descriptive. By identifying how legitimacy and institutional memory interact to shape reform outcomes, it provides a framework that can be applied and tested in other settings.

Future research should extend this framework in two directions. First, comparative process tracing across reform episodes would allow for the assessment of scope conditions and the identification of variation in mechanism activation. Second, deeper organisational analysis is needed to understand how institutional memory is constructed and sustained, including the roles of staffing, organisational design, and feedback systems. Advancing this agenda would move the field toward a more actionable understanding of reform sequencing—one that explains not only what policies are adopted, but how contested reforms are transformed into durable institutions.

In summary, the central contribution of this paper is to demonstrate that reform durability under democratic stress is neither accidental nor solely a function of policy design.

It is the outcome of a structured interaction between legitimacy and institutional capacity, mediated through processes of learning, coordination, and institutionalisation. Recognising this shifts the analytical focus from the content of reform to the conditions under which reform can endure.

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