



## From technologization lag to digitalization: Assessing synchronization and reform dynamics in Nigerian judicial system

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### Abstract

This study examined the digital transition of the Nigerian judiciary with focused on the intersection of statutory reform, technological adoption and operational challenges. The research employed doctrinal approach to examine the historical development of judicial technologies, the enactment of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015, the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015, NITDA Act 2007, the deployment of electronic case management systems, court automation platforms and audio-visual hearing mechanisms. The study found that initiatives such as LagosCoMiS, RIVCOMIS, CACM, e-filing, court recording and transcription systems and remote hearing directives expanded procedural access and enabled digital documentation, scheduling and case monitoring. Constraints included unreliable electricity, poor broadband connectivity, insufficient hardware, non-interoperable platforms, low digital literacy among judicial officers and support staff, underfunding of ICT infrastructure and cybersecurity vulnerabilities exemplified by the 2023 Lagos High Court portal breach. Fragmentation of technological adoption across states and divisions created disparities in case management and access to justice, particularly in rural and under-resourced jurisdictions. The researchers recommended the establishment of a federal body to oversee judicial digital infrastructure, harmonization software platforms for interoperability, strengthening digital evidence standards, implementation of continuous judicial digital skills training, provision of stable power and internet access to the courts. The study concluded that legal reforms combined with consistent technological support, security measures and human capacity development are required to ensure equitable, reliable and transparent digital justice in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Digitalization, technologization lag, institutional reform, nigeria, judicial system

### Introduction

The emergence of judicial digitalization in legal system constitutes an inflection point in legal modernization trajectory, a development historically constrained by entrenched legal pluralism, institutional inertia and path-dependent administrative inefficiencies that have collectively engendered judicial apparatus mired in procedural fragmentation, forensic latency and technological obsolescence (Rakhmatullin, 2018) [48]. This necessitates a paradigmatic recalibration that transcends perfunctory statutory reform and embraces a holistic digital re-engineering of adjudicatory modalities, foregrounded in the adoption of technologically enabled, interoperable infrastructures aimed at harmonizing judicial processes and recalibrating institutional capacity in accordance with global electronic justice (e-justice) benchmarks (Archibong, Ibia & George, 2022). The transition from a regime of analog adjudication, wherein procedural modalities remained ossified and technologically inert, to one characterized by digital interface integration has redefined the lexicon of judicial reform, propelled by judicial leadership, statutory mandates, multilateral development partnerships and exogenous shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which collectively precipitated an urgent institutional pivot toward transparency, accessibility and procedural efficiency.

According to Rakhmatullin (2018) [48], in the criminal justice system, digitalization has emerged as both a normative and infrastructural imperative, enabling expeditious adjudication, evidence authentication and equitable legal access across spatial and socio-economic divides. Central to this transformative undertaking is the imperative to dismantle long-standing operational dysfunctions such as

case backlog proliferation, prosecutorial stagnation, evidentiary delays and diminished public confidence in judicial impartiality by advancing from sporadic digitization efforts to an integrated, systematized ecosystem that embodies digital proceduralism, forensic agility and normative coherence in Nigeria (Aidonojie et al., 2021) [7]. Legislative enactments such as the Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015 [5], the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015 [5] and the National Information Technology Development Agency Act 2007 provide the jurisprudential scaffolding for digital integration, further operationalized through policy instruments like the Judicial Information Technology Policy (JITP) and the deployment of Court Automation Systems (CMCAS), which collectively epitomize a shift from rudimentary manual systems to digital court ecosystems (Aniekwe, 2019) [11].

Technological mechanisms such as electronic case filing, automated registries, virtual hearings and real-time transcription according to Omodele and Olugasa (2023), Bariyima (2023) [17] and Banyawa (2024) have evolved from isolated pilot projects into institutionalized practices exemplified by platforms like LagosCoMiS, RIVCOMIS and CACM, which foster centralized data systems, inter-agency coordination and process streamlining across judicial touchpoints. These digital systems, often developed through technical collaborations and donor-funded initiatives, have engendered greater prosecutorial-adjudicatory synergy and institutional accountability. Equally transformative is the normalization of remote judicial procedures through audio-visual links (AVLs), initially catalyzed by pandemic exigencies but now institutionalized through amendments such as the 2021 [7]

Court of Appeal Rules and the 2023 <sup>[23]</sup> Evidence Act revisions, which confer admissibility on computer-generated evidence and legitimize digital oath-taking and e-documentation protocols (Usang & Umeobika, 2025) <sup>[54]</sup>.

The reconfiguration of evidentiary jurisprudence facilitates remote appearances, enhances courtroom security, curbs prison congestion and produces audit-compliant digital records that reinforce procedural legitimacy (Aidonjio et al., 2021) <sup>[7]</sup>. Sule et al. (2024) stated that the digital adjudication paradigm further institutionalizes transparency through livestreamed court proceedings and publicly accessible judicial archives, enhancing civic engagement, enabling empirical jurisprudence and deepening the metrics of judicial performance. Despite these institutional gains, Aidonjio (2021) posited that the Nigerian judiciary digital transformation trajectory remains structurally fragile, spatially fragmented and plagued by critical impediments including infrastructural asymmetries, fiscal constraints, cyber-vulnerabilities and endemic digital illiteracy. The preponderance of manual adjudication processes in lower-tier courts exacerbated by unreliable power supply, deficient internet infrastructure and inadequate hardware provisioning perpetuates a bifurcated justice system wherein digital equity is skewed toward urban jurisdictions, thereby undermining procedural uniformity and access parity (Alozie, 2025 <sup>[10]</sup>).

In the view of Aidonjio, Wakili and Ayuba (2023), the absence of a national, harmonized e-justice policy framework has enabled the proliferation of siloed, non-interoperable platforms that compromise judicial coordination, create data redundancies and obstruct seamless administrative integration. The lack of enforceable cybersecurity standards exposes judicial databases to digital compromise through unauthorized access and systemic sabotage, necessitating the institutionalization of robust information security governance and judicial data protection regimes (Bello & Ogufere, 2024 <sup>[18]</sup>). These structural and technological vulnerabilities are compounded by latent institutional resistance, wherein judicial officers and administrators, perceiving digital reform as a threat to procedural discretion or as mechanisms of intensified external scrutiny, resist the adoption of digital norms (Olubukola & Abimbola, 2022 <sup>[43]</sup>). This study therefore seeks to critically interrogates the role of institutional synchronization and reform dynamics in shaping the evolving digital architecture of the Nigerian Judicial System.

### **Historical Trajectories of Technological Evolution in Judicial System**

The historical trajectory of technological innovation in global judicial systems represents a layered and intellectually dynamic continuum situated at the intersection of jurisprudence, institutional reform and sociotechnical advancement. This continuum began with the revolutionary impact of the 15th-century printing press, which catalyzed the mass reproduction of statutes, legal doctrines and judicial opinions (Zyhrii et al., 2023) <sup>[57]</sup>. Furthermore, Zyhrii et al., (2023) <sup>[57]</sup>, stated that the advent of print culture facilitated the codification of legal norms, standardized procedural practices and entrenched legal hermeneutics across both common law and civil law traditions with printed legal texts undergirded the professionalization of the judiciary, enhanced doctrinal

consistency, legitimized judicial authority and cultivated a shared epistemic foundation among legal system.

The Industrial Revolution marked the next epochal shift, embedding mechanical technologies into judicial administration such as the typewriter, carbon paper and stenographic machines significantly improved the accuracy, traceability and legibility of legal documentation (Ontanu, 2019 <sup>[46]</sup>). These tools expedited judicial operations by minimizing clerical delays, promoting inter-institutional coordination and formalizing legal formats (Ontanu, 2019 <sup>[46]</sup>). The adoption of telephonic communication, telegrams for expedited legal notifications and microfilm technologies for archival preservation further supported the judiciary capacity to manage expanding caseloads while safeguarding juridical continuity. By the mid-20th century, the rise of digital computing, systems engineering and legal informatics initiated a paradigmatic shift in judicial architecture. According to Omodele and Olugasa (2023), courts began digitizing records, automating registries and deploying electronic case management systems (CMS) to enhance docket tracking, procedural interoperability and digital archiving, repositioning courts as data-driven institutions capable of responding to the increasingly complex demands of legal governance.

The emergence of digital legal databases such as Westlaw and LexisNexis revolutionized legal research by offering real-time access to expansive, jurisdiction-specific repositories of law, thereby enhancing the analytical depth and doctrinal coherence of legal argumentation (Canick, 2002 <sup>[19]</sup>). The adoption of desktop computing and specialized judicial software facilitated the transition from analog procedures to automated systems, allowing for the digital drafting of judgments, electronic generation of court orders and immediate access to legal records, thereby substantially minimizing administrative burdens and expediting case processing (Aidonjio, 2021). Online court portals and email-based notifications according to Smith (2023), expanded public access to judicial services, thereby redefining the temporal, geographic and procedural contours of justice delivery and promoting a more transparent and user-responsive adjudicatory process. Similarly, Sule et al. (2024) stressed that the 21st century has witnessed a multidimensional recalibration of judicial ecosystems, driven by internet technologies, real-time digital communication platforms and cybersecurity frameworks wherein case initiation, evidence submission, virtual hearings and final judgment dissemination are conducted via integrated electronic platforms.

Digital evidentiary paradigms have also evolved with the procedural admissibility of electronic signatures, metadata trails, forensic logs and audiovisual recordings thereby bolster reliability, analytical precision and the normative legitimacy of fact-finding processes, particularly in areas such as cybercrime, digital civil liberties and e-commerce litigation (Ogwezzy, 2025) <sup>[39]</sup>. The contemporary phase of judicial digitalization is defined by the integration of emergent technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, natural language processing (NLP) and cloud computing now supports judicial decision-making through tools for case triaging, precedent mapping, predictive analytics for bail and sentencing and automated document summarization, enabling enhanced consistency, objectivity and administrative efficiency (Aidonjio, Wakili & Ayuba, 2023). D'Anna et al. (2023) stated that blockchain secures

record immutability and chain-of-custody, while cloud infrastructures facilitate cross-jurisdictional data access and resilient archiving. These technologies are not mere procedural adjuncts, but rather transformative modalities that are fundamentally recalibrating the epistemological and institutional architecture of justice systems worldwide.

### Judicial Digitalization Reform Dynamics in Nigeria

The judicial reform process in Nigeria has evolved through a complex matrix of historical precedents, contemporary realities and strategic policy interventions, reflecting an institutional determination to reposition the judiciary as an independent, efficient and technologically responsive arm of government capable of safeguarding constitutionalism, ensuring access to justice and addressing the multifaceted nature of crime in the 21st century. Over the last two decades, there has been considerable progress in the direction of procedural codification, institutional restructuring and legal framework alignment, most notably through the enactment and review of legislation such as the Nigerian Information Technology Development Agency Act (NITDA) of 2007<sup>[13]</sup>, Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA) 2015<sup>[5]</sup> and the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act, enacted by the Nigerian National Assembly on 5 May 2015<sup>[5]</sup> have transformed criminal justice administration from archaic, delay-prone systems to more streamlined and process-oriented models.

According to Okpom (2015), the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA), 2015<sup>[5]</sup> represents a transformative legal framework enacted to harmonize and consolidate Nigerian fragmented criminal procedure laws applicable in federal courts and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), thereby repealing the Criminal Procedure Act, Criminal Procedure Code, and the Administration of Justice Commission Act to the extent of their application at the federal level, pursuant to Section 493. Enacted in May 2015<sup>[5]</sup>, the ACJA comprises 495 sections across 49 parts, unifying the procedural dichotomy between southern (CPA) and northern (CPC) jurisdictions. ACJA applies to all federal and FCT courts, excluding Courts Martial (ACJA, 2015). The Act emerged as a normative response to endemic inefficiencies including procedural fragmentation, trial delays, custodial congestion and institutional dissonance between police, prosecution and judiciary (Agbor, 2016). It enshrines constitutional guarantees under Sections 35 and 36 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), notably the presumption of innocence, liberty and fair hearing (Adebayo, 2005<sup>[2]</sup>). Arrest procedures under the Act mandate prompt notification of charges, legal representation and arraignment within 24 to 48 hours fortifying due process and curtailing arbitrary detention (Okpom, 2015).

ACJA mandates day-to-day trial progression post-arraignment, limiting each party to five adjournments not exceeding two weeks each, after which adjournments are restricted to seven-day intervals ensuring expeditious adjudication (ACJA, 2015). Information must be assigned by the Chief Judge within 15 days, with trial notices issued within 10 working days thereafter (Fortes, 2020)<sup>[29]</sup>. Section 15 mandates that confessional statements be electronically recorded or documented in writing in the presence of legal counsel or an independent adult, thereby upholding evidentiary reliability and preventing coerced admissions (Okpom, 2015). Section 234 further authorizes witness testimony via video link, a provision applied in notable

trials such as that of former Governor Muritala Nyako exemplifying the Act digital procedural modernization (Nyako, 2024)<sup>[18]</sup>.

Significantly, the ACJA pivots from punitive to restorative justice paradigms, institutionalizes plea bargaining and pre-trial agreements under judicial oversight, facilitating voluntary resolutions and reducing case backlogs (Agbor, 2016). Section 453 legally establishes non-custodial sentencing such as probation and community service aligned with global penal reform standards focused on rehabilitation over retribution (ACJA, 2015). The Act provides for evidentiary safeguards, anonymous testimonies and protective mechanisms in sensitive trials involving terrorism, corruption, or sexual offences, thereby ensuring trial integrity while securing vulnerable participants (Okpom, 2015). Through these innovations, ACJA underscores a shift towards procedural efficiency, constitutional fidelity and restorative justice in Nigerian criminal jurisprudence.

The Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act, 2015<sup>[5]</sup>, enacted by the Nigerian National Assembly on 5 May 2015<sup>[5]</sup>, constitutes the nation first comprehensive statutory instrument addressing cybercrime and computer-related offences. Comprising 59 sections across eight parts and two schedules, the Act aims to prohibit, prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute cybercrimes, thereby reinforcing Nigerian cybersecurity infrastructure and protecting digital data, intellectual property and privacy rights (Uzoka & Umejiaku, 2024<sup>[55]</sup>). Part I articulates its core objective: the establishment of a unified legal and institutional framework to combat cybercrime through proactive mechanisms such as prevention, detection and punishment (Cybercrimes Act, 2015)<sup>[5]</sup>. Section 2 affirms its nationwide applicability, thereby displacing any inconsistent state laws in accordance with Section 4(5) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), ensuring regulatory uniformity and legal certainty in Nigerian cybercrime jurisprudence (LPELR-20974(SC) 178-179 (G-F), 2013).

Part III (Sections 3-36) outlines general offences and penalties. Section 3 empowers the President to designate any computer system as Critical National Information Infrastructure (CNII), based on recommendations from the National Security Adviser (NSA) and to establish guidelines for its security (LPELR-20974(SC) 178-179 (G-F), 2013). Section 7 mandates cybercafé registration and user log retention. Section 14(4)(a) criminalizes insider cyber fraud, particularly in financial institutions (Cybercrimes Act, 2015)<sup>[5]</sup>. Section 17 recognizes electronic signatures in commercial transactions but controversially excludes their use in wills and court orders, potentially conflicting with Section 93(2) of the Evidence Act, 2011. Section 19 obliges financial institutions to protect customer data but controversially shifts the burden of proof to victims, diverging from conventional jurisprudential norms. Sections 20-23 target internet-based fraud, identity theft and child exploitation, extending legal protection to minors under 18 (Section 58). Section 24 criminalizes cyberstalking, empowering courts to issue protective orders. Sections 25-26 address cybersquatting and digital hate speech, aligning Nigeria with global norms like the Budapest Convention. Section 27-28 imposes liability on software developers and accomplices aiding cybercrime, while Section 29 establishes corporate liability for service providers misusing user data (Cybercrimes Act, 2015)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Sections 30-36 focus on financial technology-related crimes, such as ATM fraud and phishing. Institutions must retrieve access credentials from former employees (Section 31). Sections 37-40 impose Know Your Customer (KYC) obligations on service providers, mandate reversal of fraudulent transactions within 72 hours and require two-year data retention, potentially conflicting with the Banks and Other Financial Institutions Act (BOFIA) (Alley, 2023) <sup>[27]</sup>. Section 39 limits law enforcement access to user data to court-sanctioned instances, subject to constitutional safeguards under the Nigerian Communications Commission Act. Enforcement architecture (Part V, Sections 41-44) vests coordination in the NSA, who oversees Cyber Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) and international cybersecurity engagement. Section 42 creates the Cybercrime Advisory Council to issue quarterly policies, while Section 44 establishes a Cybersecurity Fund, financed through a 0.005% levy on designated electronic transactions (Cybercrimes Act, 2015) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Sections 45-49 authorize law enforcement to secure ex parte orders for digital evidence, penalize obstruction (Section 46) and allow cross-border asset forfeiture (Section 48), subject to mutual legal assistance treaties. Section 49 empowers courts to grant restitution to victims. Jurisdictionally, the Federal High Court holds exclusive authority over all cyber offences (Part VII, Sections 50-56). Section 53 validates foreign-certified electronic evidence, while Section 56 mandates a 24-hour international contact point for cross-border collaboration. Part VIII (Sections 57-59) empowers the Attorney General to issue interpretive guidelines and implementation directives (Cybercrimes Act, 2015) <sup>[5]</sup>. The proliferation of digital technology as an essential instrument of modern governance precipitated the establishment of the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) in April 2001, with its statutory authority conferred by the NITDA Act, 2007.

National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) serves as the apex regulatory and policy-implementation organ for Nigerian Information Technology (IT) ecosystem, mandated to formulate frameworks for planning, standardization, coordination, regulation and application of IT systems nationwide (Atoyebi, 2007 <sup>[13]</sup>). NITDA expansive remit includes promoting universal access to IT in both underserved rural and urban communities, facilitating the transition from analogue to digital systems across governance, commerce, education and legal institutions. Such integration according to Abdullahi (2022), underscores its strategic relevance to modernizing the Nigerian criminal justice system through improved infrastructure, legal-technological harmonization and inclusive digital accessibility (Abdullahi, 2022).

At the 2023 <sup>[23]</sup> Global Tech Africa conference, Abdullahi (2022), stated that NITDA Director General, Kashifu Inuwa, emphasized in his keynote, "Implementing a National Digital Transformation Agenda," that Nigerian demographic dividend can be transformed into global digital leadership amidst a looming global talent shortfall by 2030. His vision foregrounds digital skills development particularly in the judiciary as pivotal to enhancing justice delivery and institutional efficiency (Abdullahi, 2022). Furthermore, Abdullahi (2022), stressed that between 2007 and 2017, NITDA established over 988 community-based IT centres, empowering citizens with practical skills essential for digital inclusion and narrowing the digital divide. Through

integration of IT into educational institutions and marginalized communities, NITDA actively democratizes access to technological tools, positioning itself as a strategic bridge between federal policy and grassroots digital empowerment, crucial for transparent, efficient and rights-based criminal justice reform.

In 2012, the Chief Justice of Nigeria and Chairman, National Judiciary Council inaugurated Judicial Information Technology Policy Committee (JITPO) to outline a policy for the application of information technology in the day-to-day running of the courts, to improve productivity and boost confidence of the public in Nigerian judiciary system (Dahiru, 2012 <sup>[24]</sup>). The integration of Case Management and Court Automation Systems in the Nigerian Judiciary represents a foundational shift towards the modernization of judicial operations, ensuring improved case tracking, timely adjudication and enhanced transparency in the administration of justice, particularly by digitizing case flows, automating registry processes and enabling real-time access to legal documentation and judicial schedules (Eze, 2023) <sup>[28]</sup>. Yu and Xia (2021) <sup>[56]</sup>, noted that these digital systems are designed to eliminate redundancies associated with manual filing and record-keeping by centralizing judicial workflows and facilitating seamless coordination between courts, legal practitioners and justice sector agencies.

In Lagos State, Omodele and Olugasa (2023) stated that the deployment of automated case tracking platforms such as the Lagos State Judiciary Information System (LSJIS) enables courts in Ikeja, Badagry and Lagos Island to monitor criminal proceedings, manage digital court diaries and support e-filing of legal processes, thereby ensuring that criminal cases involving financial crimes and armed robbery are efficiently scheduled and adjudicated without administrative delays. In the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, court automation platforms have been institutionalized in the High Court and Court of Appeal to provide end-to-end digital support for court proceedings, ranging from electronic case registration and judicial calendar integration to digitized evidence management and automated transcription services, which collectively streamline courtroom processes and support forensic alignment with prosecutorial evidence in criminal trials (Banyawa, 2024). Judges, clerks and prosecutors in Garki and Maitama divisions rely on these platforms to track legal milestones, monitor adjournments and electronically disseminate judgments, thus strengthening institutional integrity and reducing opportunities for procedural manipulation in cases involving cybercrime, corruption and terrorism.

The Case Management and Court Automation Systems in the Nigerian Judiciary received a major boost with the re-introduction of the Court Administration and Case Management (CACM) technology by the Public and Private Development Centre (PPDC) on Tuesday, November 19, 2024 <sup>[37]</sup>, during the 'Access to Justice' Parley in Abuja (Banyawa, 2024). In the same vein Banyawa (2024), stated that the Case Management and Court Automation Systems already deployed in six states, including Adamawa, Kaduna, Plateau and Nasarawa, the system integrates real-time speech-to-text transcription, digital case scheduling and secure cloud storage to enhance judicial efficiency and reduce delays (Banyawa, 2024). A live demonstration at the Apo High Court confirmed its capacity for rapid case

processing, with proceedings transcribed and shared instantly with judges and staff. Developed by Devon Tech and supported by the U.S. Department of State INL, the CACM initiative aims to digitise 50 per cent of Nigerian courts within five years, with future plans for virtual court sessions. PPDC CEO, Lucy James Abagi, stressed the need for state collaboration and funding, while Starlink internet and technical support are provided to ensure effective implementation. The initiative, praised by stakeholders such as Plateau State Chief Judge, Justice David Mann and supported by PPDC justice assessment report across 12 states and the FCT, is seen as a vital step toward a transparent and efficient judiciary (Banyawa, 2024).

The introduction and institutionalization of Electronic Filing Systems (EFS) in the Nigerian Judiciary represent a major shift toward the modernization of judicial processes by eliminating the traditional reliance on physical documentation and in-person submissions by enabling legal practitioners, litigants and court officials to electronically initiate and manage cases, the system promotes transparency, efficiency and traceability in legal proceedings (Shima & Aboho, 2018). In Rivers State, the adoption of the Rivers State Court Management System (RIVCOMIS) has notably reduced quackery and increased operational efficiency. Justice Adanma Iyayi-Lamikanra stated that RIVCOMIS introduced e-filing of cases, online payments, virtual hearings and e-affidavits, all of which have contributed to the improvement of justice delivery (Bariyima, 2023) <sup>[17]</sup>. Justice Iyayi-Lamikanra added that capacity development and the migration of old cases into the digital platform further strengthened the sustainability and effectiveness of the system and that its national adoption would greatly enhance the credibility of Nigerian judiciary. Justice Iyayi-Lamikanra noted during the one-year anniversary of RIVCOMIS that most Nigerian court procedures are still governed by outdated, pre-independence analogue systems that delay justice delivery and encourage resort to self-help and jungle justice (Bariyima, 2023) <sup>[17]</sup>. Represented by Chief Registrar Vivienne Kobani-Buzugbe, the Chief Judge stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inadequacies of manual court processes and underscored the urgent need for digital innovation in justice administration.

At the federal level, the Chief Judge of the Federal High Court, Justice John Tsoho, announced the phased rollout of the electronic filing system beginning with the Lagos Judicial Division, with both manual and digital processes running concurrently during the transition where the Chief Registrar Sulaiman Hassan emphasized that the gradual implementation considers infrastructure and user preparedness, aiming to align with global best practices. Lawyers are required to activate their Legal Mail accounts to access the e-filing portal, while affidavit submissions must go through the e-affidavit platform, although physical appearance before a Commissioner for Oaths remains necessary (Admin, 2025) <sup>[3]</sup>. Law firms must also upload CAC registration documents to create digital profiles. In Lagos State Judiciary, further reforms include the introduction of e-affidavits, e-CTC and electronic forms and letters under the LagosCoMiS platform, which integrates court administration and enhances real-time access to case information. These comprehensive reforms across federal and state levels signify Nigerian progressive move toward a more accountable, efficient and technology-driven justice system (Godwin, 2025) <sup>[30]</sup>.

According to Rossner, Tait and McCurdy (2021), the use of Audio-Visual Links (AVL) or video conferencing dates back to the 1990s when AVL was adopted for expert and vulnerable witnesses. The institutionalization of virtual court proceedings in the Nigerian judiciary has fundamentally transformed access to justice, particularly in criminal adjudication, by leveraging secure video conferencing platforms and courtroom management software to enable judges, prosecutors, defense counsel and defendants often situated in correctional centres to participate in legal proceedings without physical presence, thereby eliminating delays caused by inmate transportation, minimizing the risk of escape and preventing disruptions to judicial processes (Davies & Olugasa, 2022) <sup>[25]</sup>. Matthew and Tali (2024) stated that prior to the Emergence of COVID 19 pandemic in Nigeria, there are no instances of deployment of virtual proceedings in Nigeria. In Nigeria, several courts passed Practice Directions to facilitate the adoption of VCP.

The Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN), Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad on the 23rd of March, 2020 <sup>[9]</sup>, issued Circular No. NJC/CIR/HOC/11631 to ensure the suspension of courts activities for an initial period of 2 weeks, save for urgent or time-bound matters (Muhammad, 2020). The circular of the NJC became the authority upon which the experimental trials of VCP began in Nigeria. This is notwithstanding that electronic filing and service had existed prior to 2020 (High Court of Rivers State (Civil Procedure) Rules 2010) <sup>[32]</sup>. The Administration of Criminal Justice Law of Lagos State was amended in 2021 <sup>[4]</sup> to recognize VCP in criminal trials (ACJ Amendment, Lagos, 2021) <sup>[4]</sup>, and the Evidence Act equally amended in 2023 <sup>[27]</sup> to recognize the admissibility of computer records, electronic authentication of documents, electronic gazetting, electronic oath taking and proof of digital signatures (Evidence Act, 2023) <sup>[27]</sup>. The Court of Appeal Rules embraced VCP holistically by harmonizing previous provisions in Practice Directions in its Court of Appeal Rules of 2021 <sup>[20]</sup> (Court of Appeal of Nigeria, Civil Procedure, 2021) <sup>[20]</sup>.

The Chief Justice of Nigeria who is the Chairman of the National Judicial Council, set up a 10-man committee headed by Justice Olabode Rhodes-Vivour (Rtd) saddled with the mandate of coming up with practical measures for courts to function during the lockdown. After much deliberations, the Committee made recommendations in line with the federal government guidelines for taming the spread of COVID-19, recommended the use of technology by way of virtual sitting in court proceedings. These recommendations of the Committee were later approved by the Chief Justice of Nigeria and the National Judicial Council (Harold, 2023). The Lagos State government was the first to adopt and implement the “Lagos State Judiciary Remote Hearing of Cases Practice Direction” (hereafter referred to as the “Practice Direction”), which took effect on May 4, 2020. This directive according to Matthew and Tali (2024), was introduced to facilitate the hearing and resolution of urgent and time-sensitive cases using digital platforms such as Zoom, Skype, or any other video and audio-conferencing tools sanctioned by the Court.

The Borno State High Court held the first virtual court proceedings in Nigeria on 27th April, 2020 <sup>[9]</sup> in a session hosted on Zoom, a video teleconference platform and was presided over by Justice Fadawu Umar of High Court No.

13 (Oluwajobi & Omoyajowo, 2023). Consequently, Justice Fadawa Umaru, delivered a judgement in the case of State V Ali Mohammed where the accused was discharged and acquitted having not being found guilty of culpable homicide (Olambitan, 2020; State v Ali Mohammed BOHC/MG/CR/115/19). In the same vein, the Chief Judge of Lagos State on 27th April, 2020 issued a practice direction for remote hearing which came into effect on 4<sup>th</sup> May, 2020 that virtual proceedings could be held with the consent of parties and their counsel (Oluwajobi & Omoyajowo, 2023). This happened when the Lagos State High Court sentenced Olalekan Hammeed for the murder of a 76-year old woman, Mrs Jolasun Okunsanya (State v Ali Mohammed BOHC/MG/CR/115/19).

This shift supports the timely conduct of bail hearings, arraignments and trial sessions, enhancing procedural efficiency while simultaneously contributing to the decongestion of correctional facilities and the overall safety of judicial personnel, litigants and witnesses, especially in high-profile or sensitive criminal cases by facilitating real-time audio-visual transmission of courtroom proceedings, virtual hearings reinforce transparency, procedural integrity and public trust, with some courts permitting live streaming or recorded sessions subject to legal discretion (Emudainohwo, 2021<sup>[26]</sup>). This digital innovation is especially impactful in remote, rural and conflict-prone areas where traditional court access is compromised, ensuring legal remedies remain within reach regardless of geography or security conditions.

The deployment of Court Recording and Transcription Systems (CRTS) in the Nigerian Judiciary has introduced a modernized and standardized approach to capturing, preserving and reviewing courtroom proceedings by enabling real-time audio-visual documentation, automated speech-to-text conversion and the production of accurate court transcripts for judicial use, appellate review and legal referencing, thereby significantly enhancing transparency, procedural accountability and the quality of adjudication. These systems, which incorporate high-fidelity microphones, multi-channel recorders and transcription software, ensure that every utterance made during court sessions is recorded verbatim and stored securely, thus eliminating dependency on handwritten notes and enabling comprehensive archiving of criminal proceedings (Davies & Olugasa, 2022)<sup>[25]</sup>. The introduction of Court Recording and Transcription Systems in the Nigerian Judiciary, particularly at the FCT High Court in Abuja, represents a major step toward the digital transformation of court proceedings. Launched under the leadership of Justice Ishaq Bello, the system replaces the traditional longhand recording method with a digital speech and video transcription tool, significantly reducing delays, minimizing errors and improving judges' ability to review proceedings (Nwapi, 2020)<sup>[36]</sup>. It allows real-time recording, speech-to-text conversion with about 70% accuracy and facilitates replay and observation of witness demeanour.

According to project consultant Ms. Joycelyn Adah, the open-source software also supports virtual courtrooms and stores audiovisual records. This marks the first phase of a broader digitisation agenda, including plans for online case filing and virtual hearings, aimed at ensuring timely, fair and efficient justice delivery (Nwapi, 2020)<sup>[36]</sup>. The recorded content is time-stamped and indexed, allowing users to retrieve specific exchanges or rulings by keyword

search or chronological order, thereby streamlining legal research and reducing disputes over oral submissions or judicial pronouncements. This system also enables judicial oversight bodies to conduct performance evaluations, procedural audits and post-trial reviews with empirical evidence, strengthening institutional integrity and aiding the timely delivery of justice in cases where factual accuracy and procedural compliance are critical to fair outcomes (Atoyebi & Akpan, 2024).

### **Digital Transition Challenges Facing the Nigerian Judicial System**

The Nigerian Judiciary System (NJS), under ongoing reform efforts aimed at enhancing institutional transparency, efficiency and public access to justice, has initiated various attempts to integrate technology into its operations particularly as they relate to digital transformation, institutional synchronization and the operational capacity of the Nigerian Judiciary System; however, despite the commendable aspirations, the practical application of technological solutions in the judiciary continues to face numerous interrelated challenges that significantly limit its potential for transformative impact. Omodele and Olugasa (2023), stated that one of the most critical and persistent issues is the inadequate technological infrastructure that afflicts many courts across the country, whereby only a few High Courts and appellate courts have successfully implemented electronic case management systems (CMS), while the majority of lower courts remain dependent on manual recordkeeping and physical documentation due to unreliable electricity, poor internet connectivity, insufficient hardware and outdated computing systems.

Closely related to infrastructure limitations is the widespread lack of digital literacy and technical competence among judicial officers, magistrates and support staff, which has severely constrained the adoption, optimization and effective utilization of e-justice tools, as revealed in the 2023<sup>[23]</sup> National Judicial Council (NJC) report indicating that judges in several jurisdictions lacked the training required to use e-filing systems and digital interfaces, a deficiency that not only hampers operational efficiency but also increases the risk of inaccuracies and delays in digital case processing (Okonkwo, 2024<sup>[40]</sup>). The absence of a harmonized and integrated digital ecosystem in the judiciary has led to significant fragmentation of systems, whereby different courts operate disparate and non-interoperable electronic platforms, preventing seamless data exchange and impeding holistic case tracking from trial courts to appellate levels, thereby weakening transparency, judicial collaboration and institutional cohesion (Okonkwo, 2024<sup>[40]</sup>). The chronic underfunding of ICT infrastructure and innovation in the judiciary further compounds these limitations, as digital platforms require sustained investments in software updates, cybersecurity protocols, user training and technical support, yet the allocations to the judiciary for such functions are often inconsistent and inadequate, leading to the abandonment of several promising digital initiatives and the emergence of outdated or incomplete systems that cannot support a modern e-justice architecture (Bello & Ogufere, 2024)<sup>[18]</sup>. These financial constraints have undermined long-term planning and sustainability, leaving several courts unable to maintain or expand technological reforms once donor or pilot funding ceases.

Cybersecurity threats also pose a growing challenge to the judiciary digital framework, particularly given the highly sensitive and confidential nature of legal documents, case files and litigant data stored on court servers, with the breach of the Lagos High Court e-filing portal in late 2023<sup>[17]</sup> where case information and personal data were exposed serving as a stark reminder of the judiciary limited capacity for digital protection, incident response and information security governance, especially in the absence of trained cybersecurity personnel and comprehensive risk management frameworks. The lack of a binding national policy governing judicial digitization has also resulted in inconsistent implementation of reforms remain voluntary and are adopted unevenly across states, thus contributing to fragmented practices in procurement, training and system integration and making coordinated reform across the judiciary difficult to achieve (Aidonojie, Wakili & Ayuba, 2023). In addition to systemic limitations, institutional resistance to innovation among judicial officers and court administrators remains a major cultural obstacle, as some stakeholders view digital transformation as a threat to traditional judicial authority or fear that increased transparency will expose inefficiencies, leading to delayed adoption of technologies such as electronic filing and remote hearings, especially in rural jurisdictions where conservatism is more entrenched (Olubukola & Abimbola, 2022)<sup>[43]</sup>.

The deployment of digital case management tools has also been hindered by operational misalignment, as many off-the-shelf platforms are not tailored to Nigerian complex legal system that includes civil, criminal and customary law practices, often requiring cumbersome manual overrides or duplicate paper processes, which diminish the anticipated benefits of automation and create redundancies that frustrate users and slow case progression (Mohamad & Sule, 2021<sup>[34]</sup>). The existence of a digital divide between urban and rural courts further exacerbates the situation, with urban judicial centers generally benefitting from better infrastructure, access to trained personnel and donor-funded ICT support, while courts in remote regions remain largely analog, disconnected and unable to meet the demands of modern judicial service delivery, thereby producing significant disparities in access to justice and reinforcing inequalities in the legal process (Olubukola & Abimbola, 2022)<sup>[43]</sup>. Poor internet penetration and erratic power supply in certain geopolitical zones, remain fundamental impediments to cloud-based systems and virtual hearings, reducing the judiciary resilience and responsiveness during periods of emergency or disruption, as was clearly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when many courts were unable to maintain functionality due to these constraints (Olubukola & Abimbola, 2022)<sup>[43]</sup>.

Legal and procedural inertia also slow the adoption of digital innovations, as existing laws governing evidence, case processing and court administration have not been adequately updated to reflect electronic procedures, leading to persistent judicial skepticism regarding the admissibility and legal weight of electronic evidence and contributing to a preference among litigants and practitioners to continue using manual processes despite available technology (Aidonojie, Wakili & Ayuba, 2023). The lack of centralized judicial data repositories and performance analytics tools limits the ability of judicial administrators to monitor case trends, evaluate court performance and allocate resources

based on empirical insights, forcing reliance on outdated, time-consuming manual reports that are prone to error and cannot support strategic decision-making. Despite pilot programs introducing remote hearings and video conferencing systems, Aidonojie, Wakili and Ayuba (2023) stated the widespread challenges with audio-visual quality, user inexperience and unstable connectivity have reduced the functionality and perceived credibility of these tools, while concerns around data integrity and procedural fairness in virtual courtrooms remain unresolved, raising questions about due process and public trust in technology-based justice delivery.

Compounding these issues is the lack of systematic feedback and performance evaluation mechanisms for judicial technology initiatives, as user experiences from judges, lawyers and litigants are seldom collected or analyzed for continuous improvement, resulting in the persistence of technical shortcomings and the development of tools that are poorly aligned with end-user needs. The emergence of digital manipulation and abuse, including the corruption of electronic systems to delay cases or distort outcomes, highlights the urgent need for institutional accountability mechanisms that can safeguard against internal misuse of technology, thereby ensuring that digital transformation in the judiciary is not only technologically sound but also ethically grounded and justice-driven (Aidonojie, Wakili & Ayuba, 2023).

## Conclusion

Nigerian judicial reform record revealed a pattern in which ambitious statutory innovation has advanced alongside irregular technological implementation. The Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015<sup>[5]</sup> recalibrated arrest practice, adjournment control, plea bargaining, non-custodial sentencing and electronic recording of confessional statements. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015<sup>[5]</sup> established offences, investigative powers, restitution, cross-border cooperation and a dedicated cybersecurity fund, while assigning jurisdiction to the Federal High Court. The NITDA Act 2007 created a regulatory authority charged with national information technology standards and digital capacity development. Policy initiatives such as the Judicial Information Technology Policy Committee, LagosCoMiS, RIVCOMIS, the Federal High Court e-filing rollout, Court Recording and Transcription Systems in the FCT and the CACM deployment in selected states introduced electronic filing, digital scheduling, real-time transcription and cloud storage into daily court practice. Remote hearing practice directions issued during the COVID-19 period expanded audio-visual participation in bail hearings, arraignments and trials. However, persistent barriers temper these gains. Many magistrate and customary courts lack stable electricity, broadband connectivity and hardware. Software platforms remain non-interoperable, preventing case tracking from trial courts to appellate divisions. Budget volatility weakens maintenance and user training. The 2023<sup>[23]</sup> breach of the Lagos High Court portal exposed gaps in data protection capacity. Reports from the National Judicial Council identified deficits in digital literacy among judicial officers. Reform, while visible in law and pilot deployment, requires sustained funding, enforceable security standards and coordinated architecture to ensure equal access to justice.

## Recommendations

1. The National Judicial Council should adopt a binding national digital justice policy that mandates interoperability between LagosCoMiS, RIVCOMIS, Federal High Court e-filing platforms and CACM deployments to ensure seamless case tracking from trial courts to appellate divisions.
2. Annual judicial budgets should contain dedicated line items for hardware renewal, broadband access, secure cloud storage, cybersecurity audits and continuous user training to prevent abandonment of court technology after pilot funding ends.
3. A judiciary-led cybersecurity unit, working with the National Security Adviser and NITDA, should establish mandatory encryption standards, access control protocols and incident response procedures for all court servers and e-filing portals.
4. The National Judicial Institute should implement compulsory digital literacy certification for judges, magistrates, registrars and court clerks covering electronic evidence admissibility, virtual hearing management and court recording systems.
5. Federal and state authorities should prioritize electricity stabilization and broadband expansion in rural judicial divisions to eliminate reliance on manual registries and secure equal access to electronic filing, audio-visual hearings and digital transcription tools.

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