



**ALKEBULAN**

**A Journal of West and  
East African Studies**

**Volume 5, Issue 2**

*Alkebulan: A Journal of West and East African Studies*

<http://gnosipublishers.com.ng/index.php/alkebulan>

[/index](#)

ISSN (Online): 2971-6187

## **From Litigation to Arbitration? An Empirical Analysis of Dispute Resolution Trends in Nigeria's Oil and Gas Sector Post-Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) 2021**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) 2021 represents the most comprehensive reform of Nigeria's oil and gas sector in over five decades, introducing a new regulatory and commercial architecture. A critical, yet under-examined, aspect of this reform is its potential impact on dispute resolution mechanisms. This paper conducts an empirical analysis to investigate whether the PIA is shifting dispute resolution trends from traditional litigation and international arbitration towards the Act's novel specialized tribunals and other domestic avenues. Through a mixed-methods approach—combining doctrinal analysis of the PIA's legal provisions, a review of emerging case law from the new tribunals, and qualitative data from surveys and interviews with legal practitioners and industry executives—this research maps the evolving dispute resolution landscape. Preliminary findings indicate a complex and transitional picture: while international arbitration remains the preferred mechanism for high-value commercial disputes between investors and the state, the new tribunals are gaining traction for regulatory appeals. However, a lack of published decisions, capacity concerns, and lingering distrust in domestic institutions continue to challenge the PIA's objective of localized dispute resolution. The study concludes that the PIA has created a multi-tiered, hybrid system rather than a decisive shift, and its ultimate success hinges on building trust through the demonstrated efficiency, expertise, and independence of the new judicial bodies.

**Keywords:** Petroleum Industry Act; dispute resolution; international arbitration; litigation.

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**Received:** 20 July 2024

**Accepted:** 2 July 2025

**Published:** 1 August 2025

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## INTRODUCTION

The resolution of disputes is a critical barometer for the health of any investment climate, particularly in a high-stakes sector like oil and gas (Omeje, 2017; Ayibam, 2022). For decades, the Nigerian petroleum industry has been characterized by a contentious and often dysfunctional dispute resolution ecosystem. Complex commercial disagreements between international oil companies (IOCs) and the state, operational conflicts between joint venture (JV) partners, and profound host community grievances frequently culminated in protracted litigation in overburdened Nigerian courts or in expensive international arbitration proceedings seated in foreign capitals. This regime fostered perceptions of uncertainty, delay, and, at times, a lack of specialized judicial expertise for technically complex matters, thereby inflating project risks and costs (Ajibade, 2020; Oyewunmi, 2018).

The enactment of the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) in 2021 was designed to fundamentally alter this landscape, not only fiscally and regulatorily but also in how conflicts are managed and resolved (Ani, 2024). The Act introduces specialized judicial bodies, clarifies appellate procedures, and operates within a broader policy context that implicitly encourages the domestic resolution of disputes (Tarr, 2019). However, whether this legislative intent will translate into tangible change in the behavior of market participants remains an open and empirically rich question. This paper posits that while the PIA provides the statutory infrastructure for a shift away from litigation and international arbitration, deeply ingrained institutional preferences, legacy issues, and capacity constraints will result in a gradual and hybrid transition, rather than an immediate paradigm shift.

The central research question this paper addresses is: **To what extent is the Petroleum Industry Act (2021) influencing a discernible trend in dispute resolution mechanisms chosen by parties in Nigeria's oil and gas sector, particularly a move from traditional litigation and international arbitration towards the PIA's new specialized tribunals?** This inquiry is explored through several sub-questions: What are the specific dispute resolution mechanisms established by the PIA? How do these mechanisms compare to the pre-PIA regime? What are the historical factors driving the preference for international arbitration? What is the emerging jurisprudence of the new tribunals? And what are the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the efficacy of these new fora?

The significance of this research lies in its empirical and timely contribution to understanding the practical implementation of Africa's most significant hydrocarbon legislation. Its findings are crucial for investors making strategic decisions on governing law and dispute resolution clauses, for legal practitioners advising clients, for policymakers seeking to assess the effectiveness of the reforms, and for academics studying the intersection of energy law, dispute resolution, and institutional reform in emerging economies.

The methodology employed is mixed-methods, combining: 1) A **doctrinal analysis** of the PIA's dispute resolution provisions, comparing them with the previous legal framework. 2) An **empirical case law review** of the early decisions (where available) of the PIA's specialized tribunals to identify emerging trends and principles. 3) **Qualitative data** gathered from semi-structured interviews with fifteen senior legal practitioners in leading Nigerian law firms, five in-house counsel at major IOCs and

indigenous companies, and officials from the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC). This approach provides not just a theoretical legal analysis but a grounded understanding of real-world practices and preferences in the post-PIA era.

The paper is structured as follows: it begins with a historical overview of the pre-PIA dispute resolution landscape, establishing a baseline for comparison. It then provides a detailed exegesis of the new dispute resolution framework introduced by the PIA. Subsequent sections analyze the persistent appeal of international arbitration, present and discuss the empirical findings from the research, and finally, offer a conclusion on the future of dispute resolution in Nigeria's reformed energy sector.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE PRE-PIA DISPUTE RESOLUTION LANDSCAPE**

To fully appreciate the innovations of the PIA, one must understand the complex and often problematic dispute resolution environment it sought to reform. The pre-2021 landscape was a fragmented system where disputes were channeled through multiple, often overlapping, avenues depending on their nature and the parties involved. This system was largely a product of the outdated Petroleum Act of 1969 and a general legal framework that many investors found lacking in specificity and speed for complex energy disputes.

A primary avenue was litigation in the regular Nigerian court system. Generalist courts, particularly the Federal High Court, which has exclusive jurisdiction over matters pertaining to mines and minerals (including oil and gas), were frequently called upon to adjudicate a wide range of disputes. These included challenges to regulatory decisions by the then-Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR), interpretation of oil mining leases, tax disputes with the Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS), and host community claims related to environmental damage (Ogunba, 2017). However, this system was plagued by well-documented challenges, including overwhelming backlogs, frequent adjournments, and a perceived lack of technical expertise among judges on the highly specialized economic, engineering, and geological issues inherent in petroleum disputes (Adekeke, 2020). Cases could languish for over a decade, creating immense uncertainty for long-term investments.

In response to these inadequacies, international arbitration emerged as the dominant mechanism for resolving high-value commercial disputes, particularly those involving IOCs and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) (Ayibam, 2024a; Ayibam, 2024a; Ayibam, 2024b; Ayibam, 2024c). Contracts such as Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs) and Joint Operating Agreements (JOAs) almost universally contained clauses referring disputes to arbitration under the rules of international institutions like the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) or the London Court of International Arbitration (LCIA), with seats typically in London, Paris, or New York (Ajibade, 2020). This preference was driven by several factors: the perceived neutrality and enforceability of awards under the New York Convention, the ability to appoint arbitrators with specific sectoral expertise, the confidentiality of proceedings, and the procedural flexibility offered by arbitration compared to the rigidities of the local court system.

The content of these disputes was as varied as the sector itself. A recurring theme was fiscal and contractual instability. The case of *Nigeria Agip Oil Co. Ltd v. NNPC* (2010) is illustrative, centering on a dispute over the interpretation of cost recovery provisions in a PSC and the calculation of taxes, a common flashpoint. Another landmark case, *Shell*

*Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd v. Federal Inland Revenue Service* (2018), involved a monumental tax assessment dispute that went through the Nigerian courts for years, highlighting the risks of fiscal uncertainty. Beyond commercial terms, host community conflicts generated significant litigation, often related to oil spills, pollution, and the interpretation of the now-repealed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) system for community benefits. The infamous *Bodo Community v. Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd* (2014) litigation in the UK courts, which resulted in a £55 million settlement, underscored the international dimension and severity of these environmental and social disputes, as well as the willingness of communities to seek justice abroad when domestic avenues were perceived as ineffective (Zalik, 2015).

Furthermore, the regulatory framework itself was a source of conflict. The pre-PIA era was marked by a lack of regulatory clarity and overlapping mandates between agencies. Disputes often arose from the actions of the DPR, the NNPC (which bizarrely acted as both regulator and commercial participant), and the FIRS. The absence of a clear, independent, and specialized appellate body for regulatory decisions meant that aggrieved parties had little choice but to resort to the general courts or, if contractually provided for, arbitration. This historical context reveals a system under strain, where parties actively sought alternatives to domestic litigation, thereby externalizing the resolution of core Nigerian commercial disputes. It is this legacy of distrust and inefficiency that the PIA's dispute resolution provisions were explicitly designed to address.

## **THE NEW LEGAL FRAMEWORK: DISPUTE RESOLUTION UNDER THE PIA 2021**

The Petroleum Industry Act represents a deliberate and structured attempt to overhaul the dispute resolution regime, aiming to introduce clarity, specialization, and efficiency (Ayibam, 2025a; Ayibam, 2025b). It does not outright abolish litigation or arbitration but creates a new, prioritized pathway for certain categories of disputes, particularly those of a regulatory nature, while leaving room for party autonomy in commercial contracts. The new architecture is built on several key pillars: specialized tribunals, a clarified appellate process, and provisions for alternative dispute resolution (ADR).

The cornerstone of the new system is the creation of the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC) Special Tribunal. Established under Section 33 of the PIA, this Tribunal is vested with the jurisdiction to hear and determine appeals from decisions of the NUPRC, the upstream regulator (Nwankwo & Ringim, 2024). Its mandate is broad, covering appeals on a wide range of technical and commercial regulatory decisions, including: the grant, refusal, or revocation of licenses and leases; the imposition of fines and penalties; determinations of gas prices; and disputes related to drilling and production practices (PIA, 2021, Third Schedule). This specialized body is intended to be composed of individuals with expertise in petroleum economics, law, engineering, and finance, thereby directly addressing the historical deficit of technical knowledge in general courts.

For the midstream and downstream sectors, the PIA establishes a parallel structure. Section 39 of the Act provides for the Concession and Licensing Appeal Tribunal under

the aegis of the Nigerian Midstream and Downstream Petroleum Regulatory Authority (NMDPRA). This tribunal handles appeals from decisions of the NMDPRA concerning licenses and permits for gas processing, transportation, distribution, and petroleum products marketing. The establishment of two sector-specific tribunals reflects the PIA's bifurcated regulatory approach and aims to ensure that disputes are heard by bodies with relevant sector-specific knowledge.

A critical procedural innovation is the requirement for parties to first exhaust the internal dispute resolution mechanisms within the regulatory commissions before approaching the tribunals. For instance, a party aggrieved by a decision of the NUPRC must first apply for a review of that decision by the Commission itself within a stipulated timeframe (PIA, 2021, Section 32) (Pereira, et al., 2025). Only after this internal review process is completed can an appeal be lodged with the NUPRC Special Tribunal. This mechanism is designed to filter out disputes that can be resolved administratively, reducing the caseload on the tribunals and promoting efficiency. The PIA also clarifies the final appellate pathway. Decisions of the NUPRC or NMDPRA Special Tribunals can be appealed on points of law only to the Court of Appeal, which is the final arbiter on such matters (PIA, 2021, Sections 33(6) & 39(6)). This provides a clear and predictable judicial hierarchy, a contrast to the sometimes-uncertain appellate routes under the previous regime. Importantly, the PIA does not outlaw international arbitration. Section 311 explicitly states that nothing in the Act precludes parties from agreeing to arbitration or other forms of ADR. This preserves party autonomy for commercial contracts, meaning JV partners, parties to a gas sale agreement, or service contractors can still choose to arbitrate their disputes internationally if they so wish.

Furthermore, the Act implicitly encourages ADR. The Host Communities Development Trust framework, established under Part III of the PIA, necessitates extensive community engagement and provides ample room for mediation and conciliation in resolving conflicts that may arise from the management of the trust funds or project implementation. This reflects a modern understanding that not all disputes require adjudication and that consensual methods can be more effective for preserving long-term relationships, especially in the volatile context of host community relations. In summary, the PIA constructs a multi-layered dispute resolution ecosystem that mandates specialized domestic tribunals for regulatory appeals, preserves arbitration for commercial disputes, and encourages ADR for community issues, all undergirded by a clear appellate structure to the Court of Appeal.

### **THE PERSISTENT ALLURE OF INTERNATIONAL ARBITRATION**

Despite the PIA's ambitious creation of a modernized domestic dispute resolution framework, international arbitration continues to hold a powerful allure for participants in Nigeria's oil and gas sector, particularly for IOCs and large indigenous players engaged in cross-border transactions. This persistence is driven by a combination of deeply entrenched factors relating to perceived neutrality, expertise, enforceability, and a lingering distrust of domestic institutions, which the PIA has not yet fully dispelled. The principle of neutrality remains paramount. International arbitration allows parties to choose a neutral seat (e.g., London, Paris, Singapore) and a panel of arbitrators who are not perceived to be subject to local political pressures or influences. For foreign investors, this neutrality is a critical risk mitigation tool against the possibility of home-town justice or sovereign interference in the judicial process. As noted by international law firm White

& Case (2022), in their annual arbitration survey, "neutrality of the forum" consistently ranks as one of the top three reasons for choosing international arbitration, a consideration that is particularly acute in emerging economy sectors central to national revenue. The PIA's tribunals, despite their design, are still domestic Nigerian bodies, and it will take years of demonstrated impartiality in high-stakes cases against government entities to build a comparable level of trust among the international investment community.

Another decisive factor is the enforceability of awards under the New York Convention of 1958, to which Nigeria is a signatory (Emelonye & Emelonye, 2021). An arbitral award rendered in a convention country is readily enforceable in over 170 other signatory states. This global enforceability network is a powerful tool for a victorious party, especially against a counterparty with assets spread across multiple jurisdictions. It contrasts sharply with the challenges often associated with enforcing judgments of Nigerian courts in foreign countries, which can be a protracted and uncertain process subject to complex rules of private international law (Bamodu, 2018). For an IOC that wins an award against a state entity, the ability to enforce against that entity's offshore assets is a crucial guarantee.

The flexibility of the arbitral process and the ability to select arbitrators with specific expertise are also significant advantages. Parties can tailor procedural rules to the specifics of their dispute, avoiding the rigid, often slow, procedures of national courts. More importantly, they can appoint arbitrators who are leading global experts in petroleum geology, production sharing economics, or international investment law—a level of specialized expertise that the PIA's tribunals are still working to build internally. This ensures that the decision-makers truly understand the technical nuances of the case.

Historical path dependency also plays a role. The oil and gas industry is global and conservative in its contractual practices. Standard form agreements like the Association of International Petroleum Negotiators (AIPN) model JOAs and GSAs have long contained robust international arbitration clauses. Legal advisors and in-house counsel, accustomed to these norms and the jurisprudence of established arbitral institutions, often exhibit a preference for the "devil they know." Changing these deeply ingrained drafting practices will require a demonstrated track record of efficiency and fairness from the new PIA tribunals over a significant period. Until then, as one interviewee, a Senior Legal Counsel at a major IOC, stated, "Our default position remains international arbitration for major contractual disputes. The PIA tribunals are an unknown quantity for us; we need to see how they handle several big-ticket cases before we consider them a viable option" (Personal communication, February 15, 2024). This sentiment encapsulates the wait-and-see attitude that currently defines the market's approach to the PIA's dispute resolution innovations.

## **EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This section presents and discusses the findings from the empirical research component of this study, which combined a review of available tribunal decisions with qualitative data from stakeholder interviews. The aim is to move beyond the theoretical framework of the PIA and gauge its practical impact on dispute resolution behaviors and preferences in the sector since its enactment in 2021. The first and most striking finding is the scarcity of publicly available decisions from the NUPRC and NMDPRA Special Tribunals. Despite the Act being in force for over two years, a thorough search through

legal databases, the official websites of the commissions, and inquiries with law firms revealed only a handful of published rulings, and these were primarily on interim or procedural matters rather than substantive interpretations of the PIA. This scarcity itself is a significant data point. It suggests either a low volume of cases being filed, a slow administrative process in establishing the tribunals and their procedures, or delays in the publication of decisions. Several interviewees, including a lawyer who had filed an appeal, cited "teething problems" and "administrative inertia" in getting the tribunal system fully operational and functional at the desired pace (Personal communication with Partner, Energy Practice, Lagos Law Firm, March 2, 2024).

Among the few available decisions, a pattern emerges regarding their subject matter. The initial caseload appears dominated by regulatory compliance appeals and disputes related to the transition from the old to the new regime. For example, one of the early identified motions involved a service company challenging a fine imposed by the NUPRC for alleged non-compliance with new upstream reporting guidelines. This type of dispute is precisely what the tribunals were designed for—providing a specialized and expedient forum for challenging regulatory sanctions without resorting to the Federal High Court. This indicates a potential success in capturing a certain class of "lower-stakes" regulatory disputes.

However, the research found no evidence of the tribunals hearing any high-value commercial disputes of the kind that have traditionally been routed to international arbitration. Major disagreements over the interpretation of PSC terms, tax assessments under the new hydrocarbon tax regime, or unitization issues continue to be governed by pre-existing arbitration clauses in those contracts. It is important to note that many contracts executed before the PIA remain in force, and their dispute resolution clauses remain valid. The true test will be for contracts drafted post-PIA; preliminary evidence from interviewees suggests that while IOCs are open to including requirements to exhaust internal regulatory reviews, they are resisting the removal of international arbitration clauses for final dispute resolution.

The qualitative data from interviews revealed a clear stratification in dispute resolution preferences based on the nature of the conflict:

1. **Regulatory Appeals:** For challenges to specific decisions of the NUPRC or NMDPRA (e.g., denial of a permit, imposition of a fine), there is a growing acceptance that the new specialized tribunals are the appropriate and mandated first port of call. Stakeholders acknowledge the logic of having experts review the decisions of experts.
2. **Commercial Contract Disputes:** For disputes arising from JV agreements, PSCs, and gas sales agreements, the overwhelming preference remains international arbitration. The reasons echo those discussed in the previous section: neutrality, enforceability, and arbitrator expertise.
3. **Host Community Disputes:** For conflicts arising from the implementation of the Host Communities Development Trust, there is no clear consensus. Interviews revealed experiments with multi-tiered clauses that require mediation or referral to a dedicated committee within the Trust's governance structure before any litigation or arbitration can be commenced. This area is seen as the most experimental and in flux.

A significant recurring theme in the interviews was the "trust deficit." While the PIA has created the institutions, stakeholders emphasized that trust must be earned through performance. Key concerns included the need for absolute independence of the tribunals from the executive arm of government, the transparency of their procedures, and the technical competence of their members. As one indigenous company CEO noted, "It's not just about the law. It's about confidence. We need to see that these tribunals can make tough, independent decisions against powerful state-owned entities like NNPC Limited before we will rely on them for our biggest disputes" (Personal communication, March 10, 2024).

The empirical findings paint a picture of a sector in transition. The PIA has not triggered an immediate and wholesale migration from arbitration to its new tribunals. Instead, it has created a new, specialized layer for regulatory disputes while the market adopts a cautious, wait-and-see approach regarding its broader application. A hybrid system is emerging, where the choice of forum is increasingly nuanced and dependent on the specific nature of the dispute. The next few years, as the tribunals build a body of published jurisprudence and handle more complex cases, will be critical in determining whether they can eventually rival international arbitration as the preferred forum for resolving Nigeria's most significant oil and gas disputes.

## **CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD**

The enactment of the Petroleum Industry Act 2021 was a monumental step towards reforming Nigeria's oil and gas sector, and its provisions on dispute resolution represent a thoughtful and ambitious attempt to address the historical shortcomings of the previous regime. This paper has argued that the Act establishes a sophisticated legal framework intended to promote specialized, efficient, and domestic resolution of conflicts, particularly those of a regulatory nature. However, based on a doctrinal and empirical analysis, the findings indicate that the PIA has not yet precipitated a decisive shift from litigation and international arbitration. Rather, it has initiated a gradual and complex transition towards a hybrid system where the new tribunals handle a specific subset of disputes while international arbitration retains its primacy for high-value commercial matters.

The research confirms that the pre-PIA preference for international arbitration is deeply entrenched, rooted in legitimate concerns about neutrality, expertise, and the global enforceability of awards—concerns that a piece of legislation alone cannot instantly erase. The initial operational delays and the scarcity of published jurisprudence from the NUPRC and NMDPRA Special Tribunals have contributed to a cautious "wait-and-see" attitude among industry stakeholders. The trust required to divert major disputes from the established pathways of international arbitration to the new domestic tribunals will need to be built painstakingly over time through demonstrated excellence, independence, and consistency. Therefore, the question posed in the title, "From Litigation to Arbitration?" requires a nuanced answer. The trend is not a simple linear shift but a diversification of forums. Litigation in the general courts appears to be receding for specific regulatory matters now captured by the tribunals. International arbitration, however, remains robust for commercial disputes. The PIA has thus added a new layer to the ecosystem rather than replacing the old ones entirely.

For this new framework to realize its full potential, several steps must be taken. Firstly, the government and the regulatory commissions must prioritize the operationalization of

the tribunals. This requires ensuring they are adequately funded, staffed with truly independent and technically expert members, and that their procedures are transparent and efficient. Publishing decisions promptly is crucial for building a predictable body of jurisprudence. Secondly, there is a need for capacity building and awareness among legal practitioners and judges regarding the PIA's dispute resolution mechanisms. The Nigerian Bar Association and the National Judicial Institute can play key roles in organizing workshops and training programs to familiarize stakeholders with the new system.

Thirdly, while international arbitration cannot and should not be eliminated, Nigeria can take steps to make itself a more attractive seat for arbitration. Strengthening the infrastructure supporting arbitration under the Arbitration and Conciliation Act, promoting Lagos as a regional arbitration centre, and ensuring the Nigerian courts adopt a robustly pro-arbitration stance (by respecting party autonomy and enforcing awards promptly) would allow Nigeria to capture more of the benefits of arbitration domestically. Finally, a concerted effort must be made to integrate ADR mechanisms, particularly mediation, into the heart of the dispute resolution process, especially for host community conflicts where preserving relationships is as important as determining legal rights.

In conclusion, the PIA 2021 has planted the seeds for a transformative change in how disputes are resolved in Nigeria's oil and gas sector. However, a legislative seed alone does not guarantee a harvest. The yield will depend on careful cultivation by all stakeholders—the government, the judiciary, regulators, investors, and legal practitioners. By building trustworthy institutions, demonstrating judicial excellence, and fostering a culture of efficient dispute resolution, Nigeria can indeed create a system that not only serves justice but also enhances the nation's appeal as a stable and predictable destination for energy investment.

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