

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF POLITICAL GODFATHERISM IN SHAPING DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Political godfatherism remains a pervasive and deleterious phenomenon within Nigerian politics, posing significant challenges to democratic consolidation and political development. This paper interrogates the multifaceted roles of political godfathers, who exert undue influence over elected officials through financial patronage and sponsorship. Such influence undermines electoral integrity and governance. Utilizing a documentary review methodology, the study synthesizes historical records, contemporary analyses, and academic literature, selected based on relevance and credibility, for the period 2015-2024, to contextualize the entrenchment of godfatherism in Nigerian politics. Systematic content analysis was applied to these documents, enabling the identification of key themes and patterns. The analysis is anchored on the theory of neopatrimonialism, which demonstrates how personalistic power relations, clientelism, and informal patronage networks within formal bureaucratic structures subvert democratic institutions. Findings reveal that political godfatherism restricts electoral competitiveness, debilitates civic culture, exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, and perpetuates elite dominance in governance. Godfathers manipulate candidate selection, influence policy decisions, and foster political violence, thereby eroding public accountability and cultivating widespread apathy towards political participation. These dynamics significantly hinder Nigeria's progress towards democratic maturity. The study recommends enhancing civic engagement and political participation, promoting public interest journalism, reforming electoral laws to facilitate the emergence of alternative political platforms, and revising internal party regulations as antidotes to elite manipulation. Such interventions will serve to recalibrate political structures toward inclusive and accountable governance.

Keywords: Democracy; Elections; Personalistic power; Political Godfatherism; Politics.

Introduction

Around the world, political systems such as liberal democracies and single-party states have evolved in response to distinct socio-historical contexts and development challenges; in Nigeria, comparable factors have similarly shaped the development of its political system. After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria experienced a relentless cycle of civilian and military regimes, which deeply affected governance-citizen engagements. The transition to democracy in 1999 marked a significant milestone in Nigeria's political trajectory; however, persistent fractures, such as electoral malpractice, weak institutional frameworks, and widespread corruption-continued to undermine democratic consolidation. Amidst these challenges, the phenomenon of godfatherism, rooted in neopatrimonialism, emerged as a defining feature of the Nigerian political system.

Neopatrimonialism describes a form of governance that blends contemporary bureaucracies with archaic patronage systems. Jean-François Bayart (1993) and Larry Diamond (2005), define neopatrimonialism as characterized by domination through personalistic power relations, dominant clientelist networks, and elite concentration of authority. This system often compromises democratic governance in favour of personal loyalty to the institutions, and this undermines the rule of law and democratic principles (Oso et al., 2009).

In Nigeria, godfatherism shows the difficulties associated with this neo patrimonial form of governance (Onayinka, 2015a). Political godfathers are powerful actors who control an elected officeholder's political life through various means of patronage, payment, financing, and influence. Such a reality builds an environment where loyalty to godfathers is often preferred to accountability to voters, which leads to the eradication of civic engagement at the most basic level and fosters a corrupt and incompetent governance system. This social reality undermines the attainment of democratic principles to a considerable extent because the requirements of the ruling elites are prioritised over the general populace (Rufai, 2018, 2023).

The impacts of godfatherism are wide-reaching and long-lasting. First, it stifles the chances for less privileged socio-economic groups to participate in power struggles as emerging political actors. Elections can also regress to mere displays of power in favour of contesting godfathers rather than a veritable political competition predicated on public goodwill and merit. This undoes democracy as a system that is meant to embody fair

competition and representation. In addition, the existence of godfathers can perpetuate socio-economic divides where resources are held by few, worsening poverty and unemployment (Onayinka, 2011, 2015b). Moreover, the impact of political godfathers regarding the governance of Nigerian states, especially the Southern region, is monumental. These regional godfathers tend to micromanage appointments, policymaking, and other policies on a national level, which impacts hundreds of millions. Along with increasing political patronage and clientelism, unequal distribution of power is a contributing factor to the rise of violence and political conflict as different factions try to gain from and capitalise on control (Onayinka, Opele, et. al., 2022; Rufai & Salawu, 2021).

While scholarly discussions on neopatrimonialism and godfatherism are becoming more prevalent, there remains limited understanding of how these phenomena specifically impact Nigeria's political landscape (Onayinka, 2011, 2012). Despite the growing global discourse on political patronage, existing literature on Nigerian political godfatherism tends to emphasize theoretical and conceptual analyses, with insufficient attention to the nuanced, empirical realities of governance and the specific conflicts stemming from godfather-client relationships. Although empirical works such as those of Albert (2005), Smith (2008), and Omilusi (2016), have explored influences on electoral processes, candidate selection, and governance outcomes, there remains a lack of context-specific examination, particularly regarding the implications for democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Southern region.

Therefore, this paper seeks to address these gaps by investigating the multifaceted relationship between political godfatherism and democratic consolidation in this context.

Research Objectives

In order to attend to these issues, the case study suggests the following research objectives:

- i. What is the impact of godfatherism on political activities and the actual governance system in Southern Nigeria?
- ii. What is the impact of the elite clientelist system on the level of democracy, especially with regard to political and electoral participation?
- iii. In what ways do the analysis of godfatherism impact aid in formulating strategies that foster civic democracy and responsive governance in Nigeria?

Methodology

This article adopts a documentary review methodology to investigate the phenomenon of political godfatherism and its impact on democratic processes in Nigeria. The study draws on secondary data sourced from scholarly articles, books, government and policy documents, as well as reputable journalistic sources. The selection of documents was guided by clear inclusion and exclusion criteria: only materials published between 2015 and 2024 that directly addressed themes such as godfatherism, neopatrimonialism, clientelism, or political violence in Nigeria, and were deemed credible and relevant based on authorship, source, and peer-review status, were considered. Conversely, documents lacking sufficient empirical grounding, failing to address the Nigerian context, or merely duplicating existing findings without offering new insights were excluded from the analysis.

To analyse these sources, a systematic content analysis was applied, involving the coding and categorization of data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and theoretical perspectives related to the influence of political godfathers on electoral actors and democratic governance. By triangulating information from these varied sources, the study develops a detailed understanding of the challenges and implications associated with godfatherism for both governance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive and critical synthesis of the literature, integrating multiple perspectives to provide an in-depth account of the ways in which godfatherism shapes the country's political landscape.

Theoretical Framework

The governance intricacies in Nigeria that merge patrimonialism with modern legal-rational authority are analysed using the Neopatrimonialism Theory by Jean-François Bayart (1993) and Larry Diamond (2005). Neopatrimonialism highlights the existence of personalistic power relations, clientelism, and the disproportionate concentration of power among a narrow elite (Diamond, 2005). This theory seeks to demonstrate the overlap and interdependence of traditional and modern features of governance in Nigeria by emphasizing the patronage and loyalty systems in place (Bayart, 1993).

Opponents of neopatrimonialism argue that it lacks a comprehensive perspective on other relevant elements such as ideology, institutions, and social set-up, which play essential roles in influencing the political picture (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). Thandika Mkandawire also claims that labelling African states neopatrimonial often overlooks the diversity and

complexity of politics on the continent (Mkandawire, 1998). Furthermore, the vague definitions of neopatrimonialism render its application and measurement difficult, thus restricting its analytical usefulness (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997).

Even with these criticisms, the neopatrimonialism theory contains valuable nuances of political conflict and power dynamics. With a focus on personalised bonds and clientelist networks, the theory explains the political behaviour of powerful people – Godfathers, particularly in areas such as South West Nigeria (Alemika, 2003).

In this case, the relevance of the neopatrimonialism theory becomes clear in explaining the deeply personal nature of governance and political authority as well as the vast networks of allegiance and loyalty in Nigeria. These sociopolitical relations enable the identification of the structures and institutions that perpetuate political godfatherism and conflict politics. This viewpoint illustrates the overwhelming concentration of power within a narrow elite, which deepens inequalities and underscores the emergence of corruption. This evidence helps design governance strategies that seek to address the imbalanced political power relations in Nigeria. Therefore, the theory is essential for analysing the complex interplay between godfatherism, power, politics, and democracy in Nigeria.

Concept of Godfatherism in Nigerian Politics

In the scope of Nigerian politics, godfatherism shows a patron-client relationship system where powerful individuals, known as “godfathers”, dominate their political apprentices, referred to as “godsons”. This system has an immense potential to influence governance and the processes of democracy in Nigeria (Idowu, 2018). More specifically in focus for this study is how godfatherism creates political violence and political power structure, usually through a system of resource transaction and loyalty (Adetula, 2011).

In Nigeria, political "godfathers" frequently provide their protégés, commonly referred to as godsons, with substantial financial and logistical support during election campaigns, with the expectation of political loyalty and the promotion of their personal or group interests once those protégés attain public office. For example, in Anambra State, Chris Uba admitted to playing a decisive role in funding and securing the 2003 electoral victory of Governor Chris Ngige, subsequently demanding significant influence over key appointments and policy decisions, an arrangement that ultimately resulted in a public falling out and legal disputes (Vanguard, 2011). Similarly, in Oyo State, the "godfather" Lamidi Adedibu was

instrumental in the political ascent and administration of Governor Rashidi Ladoja, reportedly dictating appointments and seeking control over state resources, which eventually led to a prolonged political conflict (ThisDay, 2006; BBC News, 2006). These cases exemplify the recurring and well-documented pattern of resource exchange for political influence within Nigeria's political system. Such practices often undermine intra-party democracy by imposing candidates who may be unqualified or lack popular support, thereby eroding internal party competition and transparency (Osaghae, 2015).

The consequences of godfatherism go beyond the mere selection of candidates, as it also impacts governance and policy formulation. Godfathers usually try to propel their godsons for their personal or sectional interests, which detracts from greater societal good and undermines democratic ideals (Ojo, 2008). Furthermore, the rivalries emanating from competing godfathers can exacerbate violent conflicts, undermine political processes, and diminish public confidence in the government (Osaghae, 2015).

Several efforts have been made to mitigate political godfatherism in Nigeria, including legal reforms aimed at promoting internal party democracy and enhancing the transparency of candidate selection processes. For instance, the introduction of the Electoral Act 2022 and increased oversight by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) are intended to reduce undue influence in party primaries. Despite these measures, the persistence of godfatherism reflects deeply entrenched cultural and sociological factors that require broader societal change to strengthen Nigeria's democratic institutions. Ultimately, the prevalence of godfatherism in Nigerian politics highlights challenges to the effectiveness, stability, and integrity of democratic systems, underscoring the need for continuous reforms to promote accountable and participatory governance.

Concept of Conflict in Nigeria's Democratic Landscape

In the global context, conflict is inherent in all societies, manifesting as disagreements, rivalries, and discord within social and political frameworks. Classic scholars such as Marx and Engels (1848) emphasised that conflicts are rooted not simply in personal animosity, but in structural differences in values, goals, and access to resources between opposing groups, especially social classes. Such interests shape the frameworks of antagonism found within political systems, particularly in capitalist societies, where power relations are constantly negotiated and contested.

In Nigeria's democratic evolution, conflict carries distinctive features shaped by both its colonial history and ongoing developmental challenges. Disputes and opposition frequently surface in Nigeria's political arena, reflecting deep-seated divisions relating to ethnicity, region, religion, and class. This environment provides fertile ground for the emergence and entrenchment of political godfatherism, a phenomenon where influential individuals or elites ("godfathers") wield disproportionate power over political processes, candidates, and resource allocation. Here, the Marxian view of conflict as an outgrowth of structural inequalities is particularly resonant: godfatherism exemplifies the battle between different social strata seeking dominance or survival within the political landscape.

Furthermore, conflict in the context of political godfatherism is often neither neutral nor innocuous. As Morton Deutsch (1973), observed, conflict can be either constructive, leading to innovation and clarity of purpose or destructive, fostering hatred and, at times, violence. In Nigeria, godfatherism has frequently led to the latter, as unresolved rivalry between competing "godfathers" and their protégés often erupts into electoral violence, manipulation, and a general undermining of democratic ideals.

Conflict resolution models such as the Thomas-Kilmann framework highlight the diverse strategies actors may employ, ranging from competing and collaborating to compromising, avoiding, or accommodating (Kilmann, 2008). In the Nigerian context, godfathers often rely on assertive and competitive approaches, leveraging their power and networks to enforce their interests, sometimes at the expense of wider democratic engagement and collaboration.

Ultimately, understanding the underpinnings of conflict and adopting strategies for its constructive management is vital for Nigeria's political development. Properly managed, political contests can invigorate democracy and promote inclusive governance. However, when personalities and interests dominate over transparent processes, as seen with godfatherism, conflict tends to reinforce systemic inequalities and hinder political progress. Thus, addressing the roots and dynamics of conflict in Nigeria is central to curbing the adverse impacts of godfatherism and fostering a more equitable democratic culture.

Concept of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Democratic consolidation, as described by Omotola (2007), refers to the phase wherein a democracy achieves institutional stability, widespread acceptance of democratic

norms, and broad citizen participation. Around the world, the consolidation of democracy often faces unique obstacles tied to each country's history and political culture. In Nigeria a nation emerging from decades of military rule and chronic political instability the path to democratic consolidation has been particularly complex and multi-layered.

The transition to civilian governance in 1999 marked a significant milestone in Nigeria's democratic journey. Yet, true consolidation has proven elusive, due largely to enduring challenges in establishing strong, functional core institutions. Persistent problems such as weak judicial independence, a constrained civil society, and limitations on press freedom continue to undermine transparency and accountability (Mustapha, 2012). Of these, an empowered civil society is especially critical for counterbalancing disproportionate power. However, civil society organizations, like other democratic actors, remain vulnerable to financial constraints and interference by entrenched political elites.

A key pillar of democratic consolidation is meaningful citizen engagement—active participation by people in the political process. In Nigeria, persistent voter apathy and disenfranchisement have stemmed from widespread mistrust of political actors. While reforms such as the introduction of biometric voter registration have been implemented to rebuild public trust and enhance electoral integrity, these efforts are often undermined by recurring issues with political culture.

Central among these cultural issues is the phenomenon of political godfatherism. This practice, where a handful of influential individuals 'godfathers' dominate the political process, poses a serious threat to democratic consolidation. Godfatherism subverts democratic norms by entrenching patronage networks, stifling healthy political competition, and facilitating the emergence of unrepresentative leaders. As a result, political offices are often occupied not by those duly elected by the people, but by individuals handpicked by powerful elites, further deepening citizens' alienation from politics.

Additionally, ethnic and regional tensions continue to impede Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Effective management of diversity and the promotion of inclusivity are vital for long-term democratic stability.

Consequently, advancing democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires more than institutional reforms; it demands a transformation of political culture and the dismantling of practices such as godfatherism. Only by strengthening institutions, fostering genuine citizen

participation, and addressing the deep-seated challenges of elite dominance can Nigeria achieve an inclusive, representative, and resilient democracy.

Historical Context of Political Godfatherism in Nigeria

Godfatherism in Nigerian politics is a phenomenon that dates back to the colonial period (Albert, 2005). At this time, there existed a form of patronage where powerful figures supported younger politicians. Powerful elders and chiefs sponsored the political ambitions of youths, fully expecting political loyalty and various forms of recompense in the future (Nnadi, 2023). This normalized practice served both to manage political chaos and secure the allegiance of emerging political actors. It also demonstrates the cyclic nature of community leadership and political power (Albert, 2005).

When it comes to Nigeria's post-independence period, these systems of sponsorship began evolving in Nigerian politics. The collapse of colonialism, and with it the governance system in 1960, saw increased competition among different ethnicities and political parties. There was a power struggle where numerous politicians heavily relied on established sponsors, who were mostly contentious political figures or traditional leaders keen on preserving their power and influence. However, the form of sponsorship known as godfatherism underwent considerable change after multiparty democracy was reintroduced in the late 20th century.

The 1999 reestablishment of civilian rule in Nigeria deepened the challenges associated with political godfatherism within the country's democracy. With heightened political contestation came the emergence of godfathers as powerful media with the resources to vote, socialise, and work the elections politically. Today, political godfathers continue to wield significant influence over candidate selection, party primaries, and even the implementation of public policies. For instance, in Lagos State, Bola Ahmed Tinubu's longstanding political influence has often determined the emergence of gubernatorial candidates and shaped policy direction within the state (Okoli, 2022).

The evolution from the more primitive form of clientelistic patronage to sophisticated types of godfatherism illustrates the extent to which these relations have been integrated within the political and institutional system of Nigeria. Moreover, the financial muscle of godfathers has increasingly become very important, enabling them to dominate the political order and politically leverage undue influence on office holders. The outcome is the

consolidation of unofficial power structures that command allegiance rather than responsibility to subjects, deepening the patron-client network while undermining democracy.

In the context of godfatherism, examining the dynamics of political godfatherism reveals how traditional patronage systems have merged with modern practices to shape the networks of power in Nigeria's contemporary politics. Understanding this evolution is crucial for addressing the challenges that godfatherism poses to political processes and the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Mechanisms of Influence of Political Godfathers in Nigeria

Political godfathers in Nigeria maintain a remarkable degree of control over the political sphere through various methods of subjugation of elected representatives. These methods are antithetical to the spirit of democracy and add to the already festering problem of corruption and ineptitude in governance.

In Nigeria, political godfathers often exert influence over their chosen candidates, or "wards," primarily through the financing of electoral campaigns. In the Nigerian context, the financial demands of running for office frequently exceed what is feasible within rational or legal limits, making candidates heavily reliant on affluent patrons to fund their political ambitions. For instance, in several gubernatorial races such as those in Anambra State (e.g., Chris Ngige's 2003 tenure under Chris Uba) and Kwara State (as seen with the Saraki dynasty), godfathers have played pivotal roles by bankrolling campaigns in exchange for future loyalty and policy control.

This financial dependency fosters a power imbalance, compelling elected officials often referred to as "godsons" to prioritise the interests of their sponsors over those of their constituents once in office (Omotola, 2007). As a result, public officeholders may neglect the needs and aspirations of the wider electorate, focusing instead on implementing agendas laid out by their godfathers. This entrenches a political culture where access to office is determined by financial capability rather than merit or popular support, limiting opportunities for qualified and capable individuals who lack access to such resources to participate in governance. Thus, the political landscape becomes dominated by a select few with the means to finance costly campaigns, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and patronage.

Electoral manipulation is yet another strategy employed by political godfathers to solidify their short-sighted grip on power. It is not surprising that they control local civics since this gives them the ability to manage the turnout of voters and the election results as well. According to the account presented by Lewis (2011), the godfathers use their connections with election officials and law enforcement to control elections in their favour. This control encompasses a wide range of activities from vote buying and threatening prospective contestants to committing wide scale electoral malpractices. These activities undermine the credibility of elections, as the true elections no longer exist based on what the people desire. Therefore, this allows godfathers to determine political decisions, thus strengthening their influence and domination over politics.

The godfathers exercise their influence with the aid of political patronage. Using their power, they allocate many government and public offices to their loyal clients or sycophants, thereby interlocking their influence into the administrative machinery. Ayoade (2006), notes that these networks of patronage negatively impact efficiency since loyalty, rather than competence, is the primary factor determining appointment. Such a system entrenches nepotism and, at the same time, strips the government of the necessary personnel to improve governance. Thus, the focus on loyalty instead of capabilities leaves the government machinery less responsive to the needs of the citizens and more responsive to the demands of the godfathers.

The financial control, electoral irregularities, and political patronage operate together to formulate an arachnoid web of influence that ensnares not only the godsons but the citizens as well. The godfatherism phenomenon provides a political environment in which the citizens remain estranged, a few privileged elites dominate decision-making, and governance is not based on choice but imposition.

Consequently, the ways in which a political godfather exercises his influence are deeply entrenched in Nigeria's politics, multifarious, and destructive to democracy, governance, and accountability. With regard to these aspects, this particular research seeks to illuminate the nature of godfatherism and its concerns with political conflict and the distribution of power in the Nigerian democratic setting. Confronting these problems is essential in fostering better democratic governance in Nigeria.

Case Study Analysis of Godfatherism in Southern Nigeria

i. Lagos State - Bola Tinubu

Bola Tinubu, the former governor of Lagos State, is often regarded as an archetypal model of 'political godfatherism' in Nigeria. His enduring impact is evident in the persistent political cultivation he practices, such as with Babatunde Fashola and Akinwunmi Ambode (Adebanwi, 2014). His rule is characterized by relentless perpetuation of power, coupled solely with his influence on major endorsement elections within Lagos State.

What has become apparent with Tinubu's control over nominations is the extent to which godfatherism has permeated Nigeria's political culture (Okoli, 2022). His power to sponsor party tickets and appoint individuals to powerful positions demonstrates the depth to which such connections can fracture democracy (Ohiole & Ojo, 2016). Despite being regarded as orchestrators of Tinubu's strategies, these youths often operate independently and are popularly known as 'Tinubu's children' (Vanguard, 2023). This kind of political arrangement establishes and nourishes a partisan culture in which allegiance to the godfather is considered more important than the political aspirations of constituents (Premium Times, 2020). Consequently, policies designed to advance the interests of the people may instead be determined by a select group of elite figures, leading to a disconnection from meaningful democratic representation. Furthermore, this dominance fosters apathy and complacency among elected officials who fear incurring the wrath of their godfathers, thereby stifling innovation and accountability. The continued influence of political godfathers entrenches political patronage, constraining prospects for genuine democratic engagement (Sahara Reporters, 2018).

ii. Anambra State - Chris Uba

The political conflict in Anambra State involving Chris Uba and his protégé, Chris Ngige, offers striking examples of the conflicts that may arise out of godfatherism. Uba, considered one of the most influential political godfathers, tried to dominate Ngige's governance after facilitating his ascendance to power. When Ngige tried to assert some autonomy, Uba went to the extremes of trying to impeach him. This conflict further developed into a geopolitical disaster for the state which demonstrates the instability of godfatherism (Ikelegbe, 2013).

Uba and Ngige's conflict is an example of what happens when too much power is vested in one individual's hands. For one, it underscores that godfathers' transactional relationships

with their political sons may assume harmful dimensions wherein personal interests begin to overshadow the common good. The political turbulence that followed Uba's actions not only destabilized governance in Anambra State, but demonstrated the deeper malaise concerning Nigeria's polity in which clashes between godfathers and their clients become so pronounced as to threaten the functioning of government and social order. Furthermore, the example illustrates how political godfatherism becomes violent and coercive as godfathers seek to use force to maintain political influence, thus, subverting popular confidence in political institutions.

iii. Rivers State -Wike and Fubara

Rivers State illustrates yet another variant of godfatherism in the political relationships involving the former governor Wike and his successor Siminialayi Fubara. Wike's enduring political contortions have been ever so instrumental in defining the political destiny of Rivers State with his endorsements and patronage (Otikor, and Kem, 2024).

Wike's influence over Fubara raises critical issues concerning the perpetuation of godfatherism within Nigerian politics. As Fubara began to rule, there were questions about whether he had true decision-making power or if he was a mere host to Wike's political strings. The transitional politics of Wike and Fubara serve as a critical juncture to consider the impact of godfatherism on governance. Wike, in this case, expecting loyalty from Fubara may be the very reason that innovation and political reform stalls (Nnadi, 2023). Political loyalty to one's godfather tends to eclipse considerations of the public good. This relationship, however, could also create a different set of problems Wike and Fubara's relationship could easily lead to conflict if Fubara attempts to escape Wike's grip or if their divergent interests diverge.

This demonstrates the vulnerability of political coalitions born out of godfatherism, because the struggle for power might trigger instability. Conflict has led to Rivers State being declared in a State of Emergency. This results in numerous unresolved political issues (Ann, 2023).

These illustrations of Lagos, Anambra, and Rivers States highlight the depth of the phenomenon of godfatherism within Nigeria politics. The shifts in power encounters disrupt the democratic systems of governance, reduce accountability, and aid in the destabilization of the polity. This paper attempts to examine the extent to which godfatherism structures the

political governance in Nigeria, its contribution towards the deepening of clientelism, and the consequences for democratic consolidation. Primary questions include: What level of decision making is influenced by godfatherism? What is the circulation of loyalty and betrayal between godfathers and their godsons? In what ways can these relations be changed to improve governance that is accountable and responsive? The study hopes to address these questions and enhance the understanding of the problems associated with the Nigerian democracy as well as suggest the possible solutions.

Impact of Political Godfatherism on Nigeria's Democratic Process

i. Electoral Integrity

The influence of political godfathers in Nigeria's election process creates considerable risk to the credibility of elections. In line with the Nigerian Electoral Act 2010, any electoral malpractice which contravenes the principles of democracy of free and fair elections undermines the democratic order (Electoral Act, 2010, Section 120). Preferences are secured through elaborate schemes of vote buying, coercive intimidation, and selective retelling of the electoral story. This practices not only restrict freedom of choice but greatly erodes the credibility of the office holders because they owe their positions more to godfather than the electorate. As a result, civil society finds itself trapped in a perpetual cycle of compromise due to the governance gap. This situation breeds political apathy and disillusionment, causing many to lose focus on their true political aspirations.

ii. Governance and Policy Making

Godfathers exert enormous influence far beyond the electoral process, deeply affecting governance and policy formulation. For instance, in Lagos, Bola Tinubu's political influence has been pivotal in shaping governance structures and policy decisions long after his tenure as governor. Similarly, in Anambra, the godfather Chris Uba's control over Chris Ngige during his governorship demonstrated how policy could be dictated by political patrons. In Rivers State, Nyesom Wike's sway over his successor, Siminialayi Fubara, illustrates how godfatherism continues to impact policy direction and administrative decisions. Olarinmoye's research (2008) indicates that when forced to yield to the influence of a godfather, governance tends to give primary attention to his economic interests over the welfare of the people. This implies that policies are formulated to benefit the interests of the elites and not the basic and urgent social services such as health care, education, and infrastructure.

As a result, citizens' development needs are often misdirected, exacerbating social inequalities and impeding sustainable progress. The pervasive influence of political godfathers on policymaking enables them not only to suppress public concerns, but also to deepen public disillusionment and erode trust in government institutions. For example, when influential political figures allocate public resources based on patronage rather than community needs, essential services such as healthcare or education can be neglected, further entrenching inequality.

iii. Political Succession

One of the most direct impacts of godfatherism on Nigeria's democratic structure is its influence in deciding the order of political succession. By controlling who vies for an office, godfathers perpetuate their influence and unchecked dominance, thus cementing a political culture where political continuity overshadows innovation and competition. This is indeed the case for Bola Ahmed Tinubu in Lagos, where godfatherism has been successful in sustaining political continuity. This scenario constrains opportunities for new political players and champions a stifled democratic competition filled with familiar faces loyal to the godfather's machinations. Mustapha (2012) observes that phenomena lack emerging leaders and ideas, narratively stagnating the political system. This limitation impedes not only the quality of the leadership but also active citizen participation, thereby eroding the scope of democracy in the region.

It is adequate to argue that godfatherism profoundly and multidimensionally affects the democratic processes in Nigeria. It disregards the integrity of election safeguards and prioritises personal interests over the general good. With governance, it stifles political succession and creates a monopoly on competition and innovative efforts. Nigeria is in need of these strategies to reimagine its framework of democracy with well-defined parameters that draw on representational governance.

Challenges to Democratic Consolidation

The long-standing existence of godfatherism in Nigeria serves as an alarming impediment to democracy. The country has made steps towards democratisation since the resumption of civilian government in 1999, but the existence of godfathers, politically powerful forces who control the key democratic functions of a polity, continues to undermine them. Such influences take shape in the critical areas of lack of oversight, public apathy, and turbulence.

The most prominent issue caused by Godfatherism is the reduction of accountability in a political system. Politicians who owe their election to powerful godfathers are beholden to them, not the voters. It is noted by Ibrahim (2003) that public servants under such arrangements operate in a manner which predominantly serves the interests of their godfathers rather than those of the constituents. Therefore, when politicians fulfil their obligations to their godfathers, transparency declines and public oversight diminishes. Citizens become passive stakeholders as their representatives are preoccupied with patron-client relationships instead of problem solving. Such a lack of accountability fosters distrust in public institutions, creating volatile situations that further erode institutions and disengage voters.

The menace of godfatherism has led to public disenfranchisement as one of its primary challenges. Undoubtedly, public regard fundamentally restricts the electorate's ability to select their leaders based on merit. As put by Adejumobi (2000), there appears to be an unnecessary political molasses whereby vert the citizenry feel so disconnected from the prevailing politics and decision making as well as regard their suffrage to be inconsequential. Under the suffocating grip of Ponzi Politics, there is bound to be political accommodation where citizens continue to remain under the illusion that the leaders the constituents put in power do not represent the populace, but act as proxies for dry sponsors. To reduce their political expenses, citizens have no choice but to adopt a passive approach to democracy.

In addition, these trends breed a democracy deficit, as there is an increase in political inertia about the likes of participation in elections and radical withdrawal from the political scene altogether. More so, such godfatherism wrecks the minimal democratic structures established around politically contested public governance. Politically neutral conflicts that ever shadow the life of a godfather and his godson most often centre on the transitions the godson tries to make away from the pavements created by his sponsors. These subtle and complex conflicts take on many faces, such as campaigns of political terrorism within parties or even with the militants of an organised party system like in the Anambra unrest. Such governance conflicts throw the rhythm of public governance completely out of sync and introduce multi-dimensional uncertainty without the bounds of civilized and rational norms that people expect from politics (Oyedele et al., 2023).

Political stability is vital for the ongoing development of democracy because it provides the necessary framework for implementing policies, fostering economic activity,

and enhancing social integration (Oso et al., 2009). This is why godfatherism poses multiple threats to the democratic consolidation of Nigeria. The decline in accountability creates a gap where politicians become increasingly disconnected from the electorate, leading to apathy and disillusionment towards the political system. Moreover, the instability stemming from conflicts between political godfathers and their protégés endangers the political order by impeding governance and stunting democratic development. In Nigeria, these issues have to be dealt with if the country is to consolidate democracy based on the principles of responsible governance. Mitigating the Influence of Political Godfathers.

The socioeconomic effects of political godfathers in Nigeria have greatly undermined the democratic practice of the country. Still, there are various measures that can be undertaken towards their control in order to strengthen the political atmosphere (Onayinka et al., 2022).

i. Strengthening Electoral Laws

Strengthening electoral laws is one of the most powerful means to reduce the effect of godfathers. There are ways to increase order within the electoral system as well as decrease manipulation when there is a well-defined legislative structure. According to the 2011 election review committee's report, there are recommendations on campaign spending, candidate invitation, and overall election procedures that need tighter controls (Election Review Committee, 2011). An increase in the restriction of campaign funding, paired with greater independence granted to the bodies, allows the state to cut down the candidates' financial hold that godfathers have. Furthermore, a reduction encourages the occurrence of non-partisan supervisions of election activities that the general public is privy to, fostering public credibility while curbing godfatherism and electoral irregularities.

ii. Promoting Political Education

Another key tactic for reducing the impact of political godfathers is enhancing the political education of voters. Better educated voters can make decisions without the need of political godfathers for enlightenment and therefore reduce dependency. As noted by Ojo (2015), an informed electorate is able to evaluate candidates based on their credentials and antecedents instead of merely evaluating support from powerful figures. Civic education that deals with active participation, specifically citizenship and voting, and encourages responsibility among public office holders enhances accountability. The information

improves political participation, and the inflow of the information encourages citizens to demand transparency and fairness from those in authority.

iii. Institutional Reforms

Reforming the structures of political parties is important for democratizing the selection of candidates to reduce the influence wielded by individual godfathers. As Nwosu (2010), has pointed out, internal democracy within a political party needs to be improved so that participation in the making of decisions is broadened. Political parties need to create an environment that is more inclusive by establishing clear and equitable procedures for the party's nominee which are based on merit rather than personal loyalty. Political competition is enhanced by other mechanisms, such as primaries, where members of a party are free to elect their representatives, rather than the dictates of godfathers for godfathers' endorsement. Furthermore, increasing the participation of women and youth as members of the party's top decision-making bodies would expose the political system to new ideas and reduce dependence on the entrenched godfathers.

iv. Encouraging Civil Society Engagement

The role of good governance may be aided by civil society organisations, particularly in counteracting the sheer magnitude of political paternalism. As these organisations mobilize citizens to partake in civic activities, there is a higher likelihood of accountability, transparency, and equitable governance. Programs which foster civic engagement, as well as initiatives which demand the establishment of electoral integrity monitoring bodies, can empower the society to protect themselves from exploitation by powerful forces.

Political paternalism in Nigerian politics requires a combination of shifts in legal frameworks, civic education, institutional frameworks, and proactive involvement of civil society to be truly effective. Rigorous electoral laws, increased political education, and better regulation of political parties can reduce the influence of political godfathers while increasing chances for godfather-free governance. If these policies are adopted, there is a chance that the political environment will focus on building structures that serve the electorate instead of a select few and strengthen the hope for democracy that Nigeria seeks to achieve.

Conclusion

Political godfatherism describes the intricate nexus of power, wealth, and influence and how it affects the democratic development of Nigeria. This phenomenon may cynically

be viewed as a mentorship practice where elderly successful politicians, termed “godfathers,” help young political entrants by offering guidance and support toward attaining political positions, often referred to as helping them climb the political ladder. This is likely to boost a political career and ensure that relevant political capitals are easily available when needed. However, there are concerning aspects of godfatherism that require scrutiny.

Godfatherism at its worst is mostly known to undermine democratic processes. The ‘Godfathers’ command tremendous political power while democracy heavily relies on devolution of power, and this leads to governance without the needed accountability. In other words, democracy is marked by fairness and just as a positive-reinforced competition yet godfatherism in its extreme form is best shown to subvert unadulterated democracy. In addition to manipulating the electoral process, misappropriation of public resources becomes the order of the day while political leaders use their public positions for individual gain. As can be observed, democracy is destroyed by prioritizing imposing candidate selection based on loyalty to godfathers, instead of meeting the public interest.

Recommendations

- i. Dealing with the complications created by godfatherism requires an integrated combination of legal, educational, and political action. The law should be toughened to curb any straining of influence into electoral politics and safeguard the democracy’s structural components. More rigorous controls on campaign spending can reduce some of the financial manipulations that nurture godfatherism.
- ii. Educational programs directed at enhancing the political consciousness of citizens will help most people demand accountability from their representatives and reduce the grip of godfathers.
- iii. Broader political changes focused on improving democracy within the parties themselves can also contribute to dismantling the existing patronage systems. Nigeria, by encouraging grassroots participation, can nurture authentic democratic development. In the end, a holistic approach involving all sectors, such as civil society and the electorate, is indispensable in developing a political landscape that is less vulnerable to violent and nonviolent incursions of godfatherism. With these measures, Nigeria can build a more accountable and participatory democratic system that truly represents the interests of its citizens.

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