

## Research Article

# Nigeria's Unresponsive Democratization: What Role for Political God-fatherism?

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**Received:** Mar 8, 2019

**Accepted:** Mar 15, 2019

**Published:** March 19, 2019

**Abstract:** The study analytical explores the presupposed interplay between political godfatherism and the current state of democratization through the tenets of elite theory. Upon reviewing relevant literature, it is concluded that while political godfatherism may have penetrated and co-existed alongside institutional of liberal democracy as it also thought to affect policy or electoral outcomes, it does not reflect the entirety of politics as practiced in Nigeria. In its numerous dimensions however, it has not only hindered the institutionalization of democracy it has also accorded for the avenue to personify political offices and personalize the state at large. To address this trend the study proposes the need for relevant stakeholders to propagate and upholds the rule of law at all times, without offering preferential treatment to any persons or groups. Conclusively, it argues the need to strengthen institutions of liberal democracy through legal, legislative and executive will, should democratization responds in Africa's most populous democracy.

**Keywords:** Political Godfatherism, Democracy, Democratizations, Institutions, Elections, Proxy Rule.

## Introduction

Contrary to conventional outcomes and widespread presuppositions, Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 has failed to bring about considerable degree of institutionalization; it is also in want of capacity to address the persisting informal network of political god-fathers. Rather the far reaching networks of political god-fatherism (a concept used to denote the political bigwigs and king makers in Nigeria) have adjusted and co-existed side-by-side with liberal democratic institutions and affected policy outcomes, electoral outcomes as it has the probability of democratization. While elite networks are not confined to the developing world, in such regions they take on different dimensions, and at extreme cases they supplement, compliment and even substitute formal institutions of governance. With recourse to prevailing trend of combining the formal framework as abound in modern bureaucratic states and informal reality of a highly personalized state, Yahaya (2018, p. 112) is of the opinion that Nigeria portrays outwards signs of modern democracies and possess institutions of a democracy, but in actual terms the state remains particularly personified as opposed to been institutionalized.

While substantial empirical evidence is not readily available to substantiate the underlying assertions, partly owing to the surreptitious nature of god-fatherism. Such probabilities are somewhat strong enough for political scientist to accept the materiality of such practices. Arguing political god-fatherism as a relationship of dependence and benefit between a principal agent or political gladiator and a client or god-son, bounded by kickbacks and other financial or material inducements in exchange for ascendance to political/electoral office. The

study set out to investigate the negating effects of the underlying informal networks on the probability of democratization in contemporary Nigeria, with laid emphasis on the Fourth Republic 1999 till date.

### **Method of Social Inquiry**

Been a theoretical and conceptual literary endeavor, the study employs a qualitative method of social inquiry. Hence, it will rely on pre-existing secondary literature for the purpose of collecting data upon which deductions will be arrived at. The clandestine nature of the phenomena under interrogation makes it cumbersome to use primary sources of data collection. In lieu, the data obtained will be discussed extensively using thematic interpretations and content analytical tools.

### **Conceptual Prologue**

This section by way of complementing the introductory section is committed to clearly define and operationalize certain concepts that are central to the foregoing discussion.

### **Political God-fatherism**

The concept of god-fatherism is tantamount to an intercessor, mentor, support and in other times sponsor. In the Nigerian political landscape the concept remains a dominant ideology, propagated on the assumptions that certain individuals possess sizeable means to singly determine who runs for and win particular electoral office or gets juicy political appointments and access to state resources.

In terms of functionality, Adeoye (2009) is of the opinion that the term denotes the relationship between a principal and a client, principal here is the godfather considered a kingmaker, while the client is the godson a beneficiary and recipient of the legacy of a godfather.

A godfather is further conceived as someone who has built and commands unimaginable respect and follower (voters) in the community, and controls a well organised political platform, and social acceptance from electorate that could amount to electoral victories Aderonke and Awosika (2013). For this study, the term godfather in the political realm is used to describe an individual with a viable socio-economic and political network, organized structure, commands reasonable voters base, regional or ethnic personality that has the ability to sway electoral outcomes or affect certain political or policy outcomes. In essence godfathers in the Nigerian political landscape are influential individuals who determine who, what, when and how.

In an attempt to account for the root cause of politicization of political god-fatherism in Nigeria, Omotola (2007, p. 139 ) is of the opinion that god-fatherism, particularly its current form remains predominantly distributive in nature. Although an age-long, god-fatherism is a far reaching feature and an embodiment of prevailing cultural values of Nigeria. Originally it entailed ventures of a socio-economic and mutually productive relationship for both parties, its politicization would appear to have aided the prevailing instances of personification of politics as currently obtained in the Nigerian Fourth Republic (henceforth, NFR). Furthermore, the informal nature of political god-fatherism, its attendant effects on competitive democracy, patron-client orientation and other related informal practices; are largely not in tandem with the cores of democracy. On this basis, better parts of the literature on democratization more than often identify it as a deterrent of an institutional based democracy.

## **Democratization**

In lieu of prevailing trends, one can claim the focus of studies on democracies has considerably shifted from challenges and mediums of transition to a democracy to consolidating democracies, hence democratization. In abstract terms democratization denotes instances where formal institutions of democracy serve as the foundations of democracy. In other grasp the precepts of democratization as obtained in prior studies, a concise conceptualization of democracy will be proffered.

Accordingly, Elaigwu (2015) proposes certain physiognomies of democracy to comprise; authority, rule of law, legitimacy, choice and accountability. For Dahl (1971) he emphasizes the idea of contestation and participation. Relatedly, Ibagare and Omoera, (2010) argue a universal feature of a democracy if any, is the supremacy of collective interest at all point in time over individual or group interest. Hence, the features of individuality, legitimacy, rule of law, choice, participation, representation, choice and accountability as central to functionality of democratic systems over.

As for democratization, Osaghae (1999) defines it as the procedural establishment, strengthening or extending the principles and mechanisms and institutions that defines a democratic regime. Resultantly it will suffice to claim democratization as a process that involves popular acceptance and subsequent adherence to the doctrines and institutions that are considered central to a democracy. They include amongst others, constitutional supremacy, rule of law, separation of power and accountability and transparency. By way of application is it of the views of this study that democratization process in Nigeria remains painfully slow and almost unresponsive. While this assertion does not seek to refute the existence of democratic institutions, it however questions their functionality. The inherent institutional vacuum and inefficiencies may not have solely given rise to political god-fatherism in Nigeria, it does however sustain the politicization of the age long practice. Regrettably, institutional reforms amongst other measures have largely fallen short of strengthening democracy and its attendant mechanisms in Nigeria.

## **Analytical Framework**

The study will adopt the elite theory with a view to identifying and accounting for the numerous roles played by political godfathers in the Nigerian political landscape, with particular emphasis on the fourth republic. The focus here is to specifically evaluate as a complex whole the mechanisms through which political godfathers (a term used to denote ruling political elites in Nigeria) mediate with and affect the probability of democratization, with laid focus on electoral outcomes.

Elections in the developing world remain the single most important form of political participation in Africa's most populous democracy. The overburdening reliance on elections as measure of or prerequisite for democracy accords it a centrifugal role within any political arrangement that adopts democracy as a form of governance. Under normal circumstances, citizen vote for the preferred candidate to represent them at various level of governance.

For this study, the case is far from been so in Nigeria, as elections are marred by significant level of irregularities, uncertainties and possible unrest. Electoral outcomes are largely controlled by political godfathers who deploy their fiscal and coercive amongst other resources to affect electoral outcomes. The underlying institutional inefficiencies that characterize electoral outfits and other stakeholders are exploited by the underlying crop of elites who take advantage of such vacuums and alter outcomes.

Elites as a concept is based on the understanding that in every society there exists a crop of persons or groups; whom are a minority, that controls and dictates policy outcomes and determine largely resource allocation. Comprehensively, they harness the responsibility of power dispute in a given society. Penultimately, the rudimental cores of elite theory aim to account for and establish a causal relationship between instances of elite behavior, elite interaction, elite transformation, between the under listed instances and state outcomes. For Matias ( 2013) the foundation of classical elitism is the conception of elite inescapability. Classical elitists used the unavoidability of elite rule as a basis to counter argue with political liberalism and Marxism. They are of the view governments and regime types were impossible outcomes because society is necessarily elite driven. In the elitist view, elites could only be substituted by another set of elites, meaning that the majority is necessarily ruled by a minority. This notion was expressed in Pareto's (1935).

Within the classical literature, elites were often but not necessarily defined through capacity, personality and skill. For instance, Pareto (1953) distinguished elites between those who resembled the lion, describing the group of elites that dominate coercively, while those, whom are similar to the fox, tend to employ skills and persuasion for the purpose of domination. Relatedly, Mossca (1939) emphasized the material factor, as well as intellectual and moral superiority as tools of elite domination.

By way of contextualization, the study argue that elite dominant in Nigeria is reinforced by their vast material advantage, ethnic or regional support, personality, coercion, persuasion and deceit to mention but a few. In their bid to consolidate grip on power either directly or by proxy, political godfathers in Nigeria resort to any means necessary. At extreme instances they have displayed utmost disregard for rule of law or due process. The monocropic nature of the Nigerian economy and their unchecked access to state resources sustains the minority rule that abounds in the Nigerian political hemisphere. Contemporary elite theory articulately conclude elites are a set of mainstream actors controlling resources, occupying key positions and relating through power networks Yamokaski and Dubrow (2008). Thus, the concept of elite is thought to be closely intertwined with the idea of power. Power can be achieved through material and/or symbolic resources. Consequently, elites can be defined as those in possession of those resources (Reis and Moore, 2005).

Furthermore, theories of elites' sources of social power focus on the interrelated themes of resources, positions, and networks. By resources, elite theorists largely denote wealth ownership and political capital, whether through being in the upper class Domhoff (2002) or as a captain of industry Mills (1956). By positions, elite theorists usually mean the organizational and institutional locations in the influence system, such as being part of policy think tanks, or simply being a leader of an group or association with considerable sums of political capital Domhoff (2002). By networks, elites are known to other elites and operate within elite systems where personal ties, or social capital, allow elites to realize needs and wants Knoke (1994). Based on the foregoing it will suffice to claim that elite power is largely derived from the formidable amount of resources in their possession (financial and state apparatus), position of influence (political office, traditional/religious leaders, regional/ethnic leaders) and the network at their disposal, which comes with been part of a ruling minority or oligarchs.

By way of application, the elite theory accounts for the emergence and persistence of political godfatherism in the Nigerian political landscape. Godfathers as the ruling minority are popularly referred to into Nigeria consist of a few notable individuals who have unlimited

access to state resources, occupy position of influence and belong to a class of individuals who determine who gets, what, how and when. In Nigeria, almost all ethnic groups identify with a certain crop of individuals whom they accord certain position of relevance and consider as their leader(s). The said leaders overtime time come to view the region as theirs so they exploit the institutional fallacies as abound to impose their candidates or self to juicy political office of appointment and attempt to influence policy outcomes. The underlying trend fosters concentration of power in the hands of a few people, who show little or no regard for laid down rules. In their bid to impose their will on the society political godfathers in Nigeria display astute disregard for democratic principles or norms.

Furthermore, focusing on state apparatus as an institutional foundation of political godfatherism in Nigeria, the study contend persisting ethnic polarization and regional fraternization and fragmentation reaffirms the personalization of political power through political godfatherism. The said godfathers render institutions of democracy in Nigeria as mere theoretical pronouncements. While it is in order to claim institutions of democracy are gradually becoming relevant, the roles of political godfathers in the political landscape cannot be ignored.

### **Political Godfatherism at Play**

Godfathers are financiers and contract providers who take on the expensive venture of political party voter mobilization and undertake the responsibilities of candidates' elections expenditure adequately as they wield huge financial muscle Olainmoye (2008). The politics of godfatherism has become an ardent feature of politics in the Nigeria's Fourth Republic and most pronounced as a result of the abolition of state sponsorship of parties and increased in private spending Ayoade (2008). For Babayo, Mohd and Bakri (2018, p.3) the claim that godfatherism is simply an act of providing political party funding through a group of small elite body that constituted itself into power brokers and king makers in return for indirect power control and material benefit being an investment that is massively made for profit. Against this backdrop it will suffice to claim that political godfathers are party bigwigs with considerable amount of financial power, that they are willing to deploy in other to determine electoral outcomes in exchange for a proxy rule. In this sense they implant candidates into political offices in exchange for financial kickbacks or other material benefits.

Furthermore, this research is of the views that since the return of democracy in 1999, the Nigerian political hemisphere has come to be dominated by patterns of far reaching on informal networks and activities that have subsumed numerous legitimate aims of government, resulting in the undemocratic perversion of democratic ideals. Precisely, Chris (2012, p. 132) claims

the fundamental rudiments of Nigeria's existing political configuration has abounds and reflects in the power, actions and proliferation of political godfathers within the country. Further claiming the godfather politics as focusing mainly around personalized control and access to some portion of the 'national cake' which implies direct access to Nigeria's oil revenue contrary to any attempts at establishing political hegemony.

This entails that the political godfathers themselves are more or less not concerned with contesting for electoral positions or occupying high profile political offices, they are pre-occupied with playing king makers, which in turn accords them access to Nigeria's oil revenue, by any means necessary. Their act consequently does not only subvert and subsumes democratic values of popular contestation it also stampedes on the notion of popular



representation. In turn, elections as criteria for representation have been reduce to mere periodic rituals to mark the contest between political godfathers in their numerous bids to impose preferred candidates (political godsons as popularly referred to in Nigeria).

This view is corroborated by Chris (2012, p. 132) who claims godfathers have little interest in occupying political offices; rather they thrive to dominate by proxy by filling them with protégés who would be incapable of winning electoral offices on their own accord. Resultantly, their behaviors reflect a popular perception that government institutions matter only as investments that can yield personal wealth and influence, while also assuming that such institutions can be dominated from the outside by individuals. Perhaps to better comprehend the degree and propensity by which godfathers are thought to subvert and personalize institutions of governance as abound in democracies, it will be of utmost significance to underscore certain individual cases. In that regards, the study will delve further into the case of Lamidi Adebibu self-acclaimed political godfather in South-Western Nigerian.

### **Lamidi Adedibu**

From Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999 to 2008 the time of his demise, Adedibu did much more than simply retain his prominence as a political power broker in Oyo state. By all appearance his power and relevance increased under Nigeria's nominally democratic government, alongside his ability to mobilize violence corruption and other illegal modes of political competition with unhindered impunity Chris (2012). Adedibu handpicked and single handedly controlled at least one past governor of Oyo state in the person of Kolapo Ishola.

Adedibu openly displayed his political might, in one television interview ha casually asserted that, I have the final say on political decisions and outcomes in Oyo state today' in a related interview with Human Rights Watch (2007) he claimed 'I sponsor them, all of the politicians, Nor have they the sponsored denied this? Former Oyo state governor in the person of Christopher Alao-Akala acknowledged that he Chief Adedibu has sponsored everybody. Everybody who is who in Oyo politics have passed through his house, as seen in Vanguard Newspaper (October 31, 2007).

Furthermore, Chris (2012, p. 135) reiterates that despite numerous institutional measures put in place to checkmate the incidence of governance by proxy;

Adedibu showed no restrain in his quest to re-establish his dominance and control over the state government. In a wanton display of his overreaching influence, Adedibu in 2005 supposedly orchestrated his loyalist in the Oyo state legislature 18 out of 32 members of the parliament attempted to impeach governor Ladoja his erstwhile political godson. The supporters of the governor claimed the pro-impeachment camp was bribed, blackmailed or otherwise beholden to Adedibu.

Based on the foregoing it will suffice to argue that, individuals such as Lamidi Adedibu have over- time come to replace formal rational institutions of democracy. More than often they tend to impose their preferred candidates or proxies (political god-son as they are referred to in Nigeria) on the larger society.

The resultant effect of such practice overtime includes amongst others, an unresponsive democratization, personalistic states, and weak formal institutions of government, political instability, corruption and inability of governments to deliver the dividends of democracy.

In other times godfathers themselves occupy political or electoral offices and leverage the power therewith to install protégés into positions that their own office has no formal control over. Subsequently, they demand either loyalty or economic and financial return as kickbacks for their role in securing such positions for their protégés. Hence, it is of the opinion of this study that political godfatherism as a deviant of democratization is closely embedded in Nigeria's corrupt and do-or-die brand of politics. Furthermore, the systematic impunity and disregard for rule of law has eaten deep into the near personal state of Nigeria to sustain the costly practice of government and affect the probability of institutionalizing democracy.

### Conclusion

While the pervasive form of political godfatherism has come to be part of politics as obtained in Nigeria, it does not in any way reflect the overall nature of politics in Africa's most populous democracy. It however remains a major constraint to the institutionalization of democracy and formalization of political power accordingly. While some godfather are less influential and famous compared to others, they share a striking similarity that abounds in their ability to mobilize resource, violence and alter or affect policy and electoral outcomes. Despite a handful of institutional measures put in place to strengthen institutions of liberal democracy, they have largely remained unsuccessful in their numerous bid to arrest the ugly incidence of political godfatherism. Hence, it is the view of this study that the need for value reorientation and mass sensitization of the dangers of personalistic rule in the form of political godfatherism deprives the society of representation, responsiveness, transparency and accountability in the public spheres. Conclusively, it remains the responsibility of relevant stakeholders to uphold the rule of law at all times and resist imposition from all quarters.

### Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest of any kind.

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**Citation:** Yahaya Yakubu. 2019. Nigeria's Unresponsive Democratization: What Role for Political God-fatherism?. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*, 3(3): 154-161.

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