

## **Godfather Politics and Democratic Sustenance in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

An emergent feature of the Nigerian democracy is the politics of godfatherism in the electoral process. In Nigeria today, one can hardly win an election without a godfather. Godfathers see politics as an opportunity to invest in their Godsons, with the aim of getting not only their money back but also making profits; it has now become a source of business. Politics has been monetized in Nigeria, credibility no longer counts, citizens with the highest bids gets party nominations, secure tickets and win elections. Most of the credible candidates do not have huge amount of money to purchase party nomination forms. This links us to Godfatherism where those who are financially handicapped are sponsored by some people called the Godfathers to clinch electoral victory. The paper gives an overview of godfather politics and democratic sustenance in Nigeria. The paper examined the activities of godfathers in Nigeria and the effects associated with them. The study adopted the secondary sources of data collection while the elite theory was utilized as the theoretical underpinning. The findings of the study reveal that godfathers truncate democracy as they deprive the people from voting for credible and competent candidates. The paper among others, recommends that there should be orientation and enlightenment by government agencies saddled with the mandate such as National Orientation Agency (NOA) on the dangers and consequences of political godfatherism.

**Keywords:** Politics, Godfathers, Patron-client, Sustenance and Democracy.

### **Introduction**

In Nigeria today, one can hardly secure a political office, be it elective or appointive without a godfather. Godfatherism is one of the most popular practices in contemporary Nigerian politics. The phenomenon of godfatherism has become a plague in the body of Nigerian politics. There is an emerging trend in Nigeria which indicates that an intending contestant must have and depend on a godfather with the requisite wealth and power to get him into elective office. The implication is that contestants no longer rely on their popularity among the electorates but on their chosen godfathers to help them secure electoral victories.

Godfatherism is not a new phenomenon in the Nigerian politics, it has only assumed a new dimension in the democratic dispensations under the fourth republic. This could be attributed to the fact that the Nigerian economy is still at the primitive stage of capital accumulation by the renters and commissioned agents with little or no productive capacities. Politics therefore is the only means of reaching out at the state resources. This phenomenon has trampled on the basic principle of democracy and has encouraged the failure of necessary structures and institutions to act decisively at correcting the abnormalities. Godfatherism in Nigeria is therefore a manifestation of a societal decay; it has become a pestilence to the practice of true democracy in Nigeria (Edigin, 2010). Godfatherism has become a factor in Nigerian politics such that very few politicians can achieve success without the stalwart support of godfathers. In Nigeria, the desire of individuals to rule at all cost has sold political leadership to the highest bidders, as whopping sums of money are needed for electoral manipulation. Therefore, desperate politicians who wish to win elections usually seek after

godfathers. The implication of this in Nigerian politics is that, the country is yet to make appreciable progress in transparent governance because godfathers usually create setback, which hinders democratic consolidation in Nigeria (Edigin, 2010).

One of the prevailing fundamental and sensitive issues in Nigerian politics that cannot be ignored is godfatherism. The political relationship under successive governments in Nigeria is a reflection of the international economic order, which facilitates the pursuit or regime change by avaricious godfathers whose major pre-occupation is to perpetuate their hegemonic political influence for personal interest and aggrandizement (Osuntokun, 2003). Godfatherism has undoubtedly affected democratic sustenance in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **The Concept of Godfatherism**

The concept of godfatherism is synonymous to mentoring, benevolence, support and sponsoring. In a political setting, the concept is an ideology that is championed on the belief that certain individuals possess considerable means to unilaterally determine who get a party's ticket to run for an election and who wins in the electoral contest. To Adeoye (2009), it is a term used to describe the relationship between a godfather and godson. A godfather is a kingmaker, boss, mentor, and principal, while godson is the beneficiary and recipient of the legacy of a godfather. A godfather is someone who has built unimaginable respect and followers (voters) in the community, and possess a well organised political platform, and general acceptance from electorate that could secure victory for candidates of his choice (Bala and Tyoden, 1987). It comprises of a coalition of strong socio-economic and political elites that share similar value system, and under an organized structure. In most cases, there are always godfathers who control the affairs of the mafia. Godfathers are powerful individuals who determine who, what, when and how a person gains access in the corridors of power. Many godfathers in the present-day Nigeria operate like the mafia by displaying similar violent scheming and aggressive politicking, coupled with manipulating devices of having their way by any means. They rely on Machiavelli's slogan of "the end justify the means".

In the views of Bassey and Enetak (2008), godfatherism connote the power and influence of people who are politically relevant in deciding who gets nominated to contest elections and who eventually wins the election. Godfathers are highly politically mobile and can sway political support to the political party and/or candidate behind which they throw their political weight. Those that play godfatherism are known as godfathers while those who benefit from their benevolence are known as godson. Kolawole (2004) sees godfatherism as an institution of political king-making through which certain political office holders of tenuous political clout come into power. Hence, it is a relationship based on political surrogacy involving financial and moral assistance where the godfather is the major donor and the godson the primary receiver. However, as the relationship progresses, the godfather stands to reap his investment. It can therefore be described as a relationship based on "give and take." Be that as it may, it is important to note that this relationship is not fixed. As a matter of fact, it breaks over time as a result of the contradictions inherent in godfatherism. Godfatherism in its simplest form can be generally seen as a practice which entails the sustenance of a kind of social and political relationships in which the subordinate looks onto the superior for the propagation and fulfilment of certain roles, desires and interactions which binds both together or in which both have equal stake but with the superior determining what the subordinate gets in the process (Williams, 2004). According to him, this view presents godfatherism as a relationship between a superior and a subordinate in which the superior has some level of influence over the

subordinate as a result of his superior status. In other words, godfatherism connotes a mutual relationship between individuals in which one is superior and the other a subordinate who relies on his superior partner for favours to help him attain his life goals. The conventional civic sense of godfatherism, which is inclined to posturing a credible candidate and granting him a mentorship support to enhance results oriented governance, is however opposed by entrepreneurial sense of politics. It is a term now reserved for God forsaken criminals who will go to any length to achieve their set goals of wielding political power including assault, intimidation, warning flogging and sometimes assassinations. Godfatherism is one of the pandemic that is endangering our polity. It compels elected official to siphon funds made for public infrastructural development to private accounts, of their godfathers, thereby jeopardizing and mortgaging the future of the citizens.

### **Politics**

The word politics is derived from the Greek word '*Polis*' which means city state. The Greek notion of polis is the process by which men debate matters concerning the polis and take actions in an attempt to realize the public interest and common goods. In recent times, the term politics has come to mean different things. For instance, Appadorai (1974) defines politics as the science concerned with the state and of the conditions essential to its existence and development. According to Easton (1965), politics is the authoritative allocation of values in the society. Also, politics is seen as the art of influencing, manipulating and controlling others. On his part, Lasswell (1930) defines politics as, who gets what, when and how. To Mao (1965), politics is war without bloodshed. Generally speaking, politics is manipulation, struggle and conflict resolution in the society.

### **Democracy**

The word democracy is derived from two Greek words 'demos' and 'kratia', the former meaning the people' and the latter meaning 'rule of'. Appadorai (1974) opined that democracy is a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representative, periodically elected by themselves. It is a form of government in which the masses of the population possess the right to share in the exercise of sovereign power. There are, however, two types of democracy, which are direct and indirect democracy. In direct democracy, the people themselves express their will on public affairs by themselves such as was the practice in the Greek city state and Igbo pre-colonial societies. This was possible due to limited number of people and as such the whole society could participate in decision making directly. The second one is the indirect democracy by which the will of the state is not formulated and expressed by the people themselves but by proxy or representatives to whom they delegate the power of deliberation and decision making.

Abraham Lincoln, former President of the United States of America, defined democracy as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Democracy means freedom of choice, the right to participate in the state affairs without restriction. Some of the characteristics of democracy are; periodic election, free press, existence of opposition party, civil society and pressure groups, independence of the judiciary, separation of powers/checks and balances, application of rule of law, accountability and so on.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is anchored on the Elite theory. The classical elite theory of Pareto, Mosca and Michels will be the framework for this paper. The major assumptions of elite theory are as follows:

- i. In every society, there is a minority that governs the society. This minority belongs to the elite. According to Pareto minority rule is the reality in all societies whether simple or complex, developing or developed.

- ii. Major decisions which influence society is taken by the elite, and these decisions more often than not, are beneficial to the elite class rather than the generality of the people or masses.
- iii. The second class, the masses, is controlled and manipulated by the elites, inertly accepting the distorted information used by the elites to justify their rule.
- iv. The fundamental changes in the society take place when elite replaces another. Pareto (cited in Ibietan and Ajayi, 2015) calls it “circulation of elites.” According to Pareto, people are ruled by elites, where throughout human history, the continuous replacement of certain elites with another, new elites rise and old elites fall. In his words, “elites or aristocrats do not last. They live or take position in a certain time. History is a graveyard of aristocracies” (Ibietan and Ajayi, 2015).
- v. The rule by the few minorities is unavoidable in human society and the ruling minority is superior to the mass of the people who lack direction and capacity to govern and thereby require the leadership of elite for guidance.

### **Criticism of the Elite theory**

The elite theory has been criticised on the grounds that:

- The notion of elite revolves around power and yet this concept is not well defined by the classical elite theorists and this makes it possible to include in the ruling elites wielders of different sorts of powers and also those who wield no power (Tittenbrun, 2013).
- Similarly, Korom (2015) contends that the elite theorists failed to develop a clear-cut elite concept and that most of their arguments were general and lacking concrete substance.
- Dahl (1958) criticised the elite theory on the ground that no single elite exercised overall influence on every aspect of decision making. In his work *Who Governs? Examine three political issues in New Haven, Connecticut* namely: party nominations for local elective offices/ positions, public education and urban development. He found that no single elite operating behind the scene, but rather many lines of cleavages and politicians who were responsible to the desires of the citizenry.
- It is too simplistic because it fails to differentiate between different political systems. It assumes that all political systems are the same. The genuine differences between democracy and authoritarianism are dismissed. They are all regarded as oligarchy.
- The argument that political elites are superior to the masses is simply an assertion. There are no objective criteria being provided by which we can measure the superior quality of the elites.

### **Relevance of the Elite Theory**

The choice of elite theory is rooted on the fact that public policy reflects the values and preferences of the elite, rather than the demand of the masses. Robert (2006) argued that elite theory is based on the idea that society is divided into the selected few, who are capable and have the supreme leadership and the vast masses that are to be ruled. Varma (1975) contends that every society is ruled by the minority that posses some qualities, charisma and sagacity; these qualities are necessary for its ascension to full social and political power. The elite consist of those successful persons who rise to the top in every occupation and strata of the society. The relevance and implication of of the elite theory as it is applicable to this work is that one could understand

that the elite (godfathers) in Nigeria select candidate and manipulate the voters through propaganda and their resources, public policy do not necessary serve public interest. Elite theory also situates governance of the state in the hands of the elite (godfathers and their godsons) as the mechanism for majority control and accountability do not prevent elite supremacy. The choice and relevance of this theory to this study is justified by the fact that, godfathers themselves are elites. Godfathers are influential people in the society, with their wealth, they push themselves into the political realm, they formulate policies that reflect their personal aggrandizement and idiosyncrasy to the detriment of the poor masses in the society and these elites are few but wield enormous power and influence. They work assiduously to sustain the status quo which is their common interest. The implication is that policies of government are conservative and incremental rather than radical and progressive in nature.

### **Godfather politics and democratic sustenance in Nigeria**

Although, godfathers appear in many western political studies, the situation is different in Nigeria. The patron/client relationship that popularized the term in Nigerian politics has cultural role among many Nigerians people. It is not a totally new experience in the sociology of the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo people for people to have one or the other type of godfather. For instance, the word godfather has a local equivalence, in Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo language and these words have been used since the pre-colonial era. A godfather is known among the Hausas as a Maigida (Landlord) or the head of the house hold. A godfather is referred to in Yoruba land as babakekere (the small father), a person of lesser social status that attached himself for support, which could be social or economic. The godfather gets something in return from his godson.

According to Temionu (2006), the desire of both negative and positive godfathers is to have strangleholds on supreme leadership. Based on semantic analysis, to govern and to dictate almost the same message without mincing words. Democracy also has an atom of dictatorship. So, every politician is a clever dictator under the shelter of democracy. But civilized politicians who apply high ethical and moral standard to their political practice become real democrats. Godfatherism is an unpronounced global political culture and a complement to democracy. Even in the United States of America where polity is strictly pivoted on democracy, studies have shown that Americas political practice as being propelled by godfatherism.

Okoye (2007) has however, noted that godfatherism is a silent feature of electoral politics and governance in Nigeria. This is because the political godfather phenomenon that become a silent feature of electoral politics and governance in Nigeria cannot by any ideological syllogism be convincingly accepted as a feature of democracy. It is contrary to democracy's warning advocacy that the authority to determine who governs, how and when resides legitimately with the people.

Gambo (2006) sees godfatherism as inimical to the growth and substance of democracy through the erosion of the normative elements of democracy. He further stressed the implication of godfatherism for democratic growth and stability is the erosion of the normative element of democracy. In a political system where prescribed electoral rules are frequently floated with impunity, the basis of the citizens' trust in government is compromised. The consequence, therefore, is first, a critical social capital is lost. When there is no basis of mutual suspicion, misperception of predispositions can easily generate unstable social order. As Godfathers publicly boast of single-handedly fixing people in both elective and appointive offices at the federal, state

and local government level, “they are directly communicating the source of citizen’s feelings of lack of political competence and efficacy in the system where there is no effective government’s response to this self confession.

According to Ayoade (2006), godfatherism distorts democratic processes in a state, because godfathers obstruct elections. The godfather makes substantial critical government decisions, appointment and is recipient of either major juicy contract or earns inordinate stipends. Godfathers reverse executive decisions. They even issue decrees to the utter embarrassment of their godsons. They traverse the polity as a colossus benefiting from gross anti-democracy. Godfatherism negates all tenets of democracy and has consistently threatened law and order especially in the fourth republic. Gambo (2006) noted that since the inauguration of the fourth republic in 1999, godfathers have emerged in some number of states of the federation. Some of them have been in the field for a longer period than others; however, there are godfathers that exercise overt influence and those that exercise covert influence over their godsons. Be that as it may, states in Nigeria such as Anambra, Oyo, Borno, Kwara, Enugu among others witnessed pronounced influence of godfathers in their politics. In Anambra State, for instance, successive godfathers have exercised overbearing influence over their political godsons. For instance, Chief Mbadinuju had heavy burden of contending with Chief Emeka Offor who sponsored him to win the Anambra State Governorship election in 1999. The governor expended more energy and time struggling to free the resources of the state from the predatory grips of the godfather. The conflict between the governor and his estranged godfather got so pronounced to the extent of crippling the machinery of the state government. Consequently, the state under the embattled Mbadinuju recorded gross deficit of democratic dividends and this generated widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of the state government. The government was voted out of power in the 2003 general election.

In 2003, the Peoples’ Democratic Party candidate, Dr. Chris Ngige was supported by Chris Uba, who manipulated the electoral process in favour of his godson. Chris Uba had negotiated the most sinister agreement with Dr. Chris Ngige, his godson. Chris Uba used his influence to have his godson return as the Anambra State Governor. No sooner was Uba’s godson sworn in, then, trouble started over who should propose people for what offices in the state. While Uba wanted the immediate enforcement of the terms of the mutually accepted agreement preceding the election, Dr. Ngige perhaps upon reflection fought back to save the resources of the State for the common good of the people in the state. Uba had wanted to have 10 of his cronies out of the 17 commissioner slot to be appointed by him, when the godson out rightly declined such request, godfather Uba demanded for a sum of three Billion naira as compensation for financing of Ngige’s election, Ngige refused and this was what led to the miss-understanding between the duo which subsequently led to serious political crisis and breaking down of law and order and government properties.

According to Ayoade (2006), godfathers do not invest colossal sum that the project require but invest their courage, grass root support, security and political connections as it was the case of Chief Lamidi Ariyibi Adedibu popularly known as the strongman of Ibadan politics. Oyo State is not the case of a benefactor because Adedibu did not invest the colossal sum that the project required. Rashidi Ladoja who eventually became the governor of the state was alleged to have supplied the funds for the project. But Adedibu is a man of tremendous political clout and courage. He has overturned and maintained a formidable grassroots support and he is an astute politician. He has every strong political and security connection as well as access to funds when needed to oil

his political machinery, he deployed all these resources during the process that resulted in the impeachment of his godson, Senator Rasheedi Ladoja in Oyo State. Gambo (2006) posited that the Godfather fell out with his godson on account of not being loyal to him after having invested much to get him to Oyo State Government house.

Adedibu widely reputed as the strong man of Ibadan politics, accepted to play the role of godfather to Ladoja who is not far from him. Adedibu invested heavily on the election of Ladoja so that he can get his money back and even profits, but the aim was defeated, and as such Adedibu had to mobilize the State House of Assembly to impeach Ladoja, his godson. Borno State is another State with the same scenario of godfatherism.

Gambo (2006) noted that Borno State experience was an exceptional one because godfathers would always want to cultivate surrogates because godfathers are directly or indirectly saleable to voters or would want to protect themselves from liability. In Borno State, Governor Kachallah who was supported by his godfather, Senator Modu Sheriff was ousted by the latter in 2003 general election. The godfather personally and courageously challenged his godson in a political contest. The Borno experience was an exception because godfathers would always want to cultivate surrogates; Senator Ali Modu Sherif who contested against his godson won the election in Borno State. The Borno experience presents a unique scenario. One possible explanation for this could be that the godson he cultivated in 1999 and supported to win election as governor of Borno State, failed to meet the expectation of the people in terms of delivery of the dividends of democracy.

Omodia (2009) maintained that in Kwara State, located in North central of Nigeria which is widely referred to as Saraki dynasty, the phenomenon of godfatherism is deeply entrenched here, and this explains the phenomenon in Kwara State. Hardly can any politician in the state contest and win election without maintaining any form of connection with Dr. Olusola Saraki (Oloye). In 1999, Dr. Olusola Saraki adopted Alhaji Mohammed Lawal as his Godson and made him Governor on the platform of the then All Peoples' Party (APP). However, towards the twilight of his first term, a fundamental misunderstanding developed between the godson and the godfather. The disagreement continued to a point that anarchy was let loose in the State as 2003 election year was fast approaching and Governor Lawal lost out in the political fray between him and his godfather. In 2003, Saraki crossed over to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) on which platform his son, a medical doctor contested for the governorship, Mohammed Lawal became a political orphan as a result of this development and consequently lost the governorship contest to Dr. Bukola Saraki. To show the strength of his political clout in the State, one of Olusola Saraki's daughter was elected as member of Senate in 2003. It is quite unprecedented in the political history of Nigeria to have biological brother and sister elected as Governor and Senator at the same time. All the people Olusola Saraki installed as Kwara State Governors have disappointed him, and as such, he was advised to bring his son Dr. Bukola Saraki who was a medical practitioner in London (Omodia, 2007).

Olusola believed the only person that can protect his interest as Governor in Kwara State was his son Bukola and he asked his son to come to Nigeria to contest for Kwara State Governorship position. But very unfortunate, Bukola disappointed his father more than any other Governor in Kwara State has done. Olusola died without reconciling with his biological son and godson over who becomes the Kwara State Governor in 2011. Olusola preferred his biological daughter Gbemi Saraki while Bukola preferred Abdullfatah Ahmed.

Jibrin, (2003) holds that there are other States with issues and crisis between godfathers and godsons to the extent of godfathers truncating the second term ambition of their godsons. For example, in a State such as Zamfara, Ahmed Sani Yarima Bakura truncated the second term ambition of Ahmed Shinkafi. In Nasarawa State, Abdullahi Adamu truncated the second term ambition of Aliyu Akwe Doma as Nasarawa State Governor. From the preceding cases, even though they are by no means exhaustive, it is indeed evidently clear that godfatherism is formally establishing itself in Nigeria is democratic process. According to Jibrin (2003), the concept of godfather is formally getting deep into contemporary Nigerian politics. It is obvious that there is no part of Nigeria which can be said to be immune to the phenomenon of Godfatherism, even though there could be some particular regional patterns.

### **Reasons for Godfatherism in Nigerian Democracy**

- i. Godfatherism in Nigerian democracy is said to be propelled by some reasons that are political and socio-economic in nature. According to Olufemi (2008), illiteracy is one of the major reasons that enhances godfatherism because most citizens are illiterate that can neither read nor write thereby capitalizing on their ignorance by the elites.
- ii. Nnamani (2003) noted that ignorance contributes to the emergence of godfatherism because poverty and ignorance make it possible for the elite to recruit loyalist as thugs to be involved in intimidating of voters and political opponent and snatching of ballot boxes. Olufemi (2008) argued that potential leaders seek power desperately and go into all sorts of agreement to cling to power against the wishes of the electorate.
- iii. The zeal of getting to the position of authority by all means is another factor or reasons for godfatherism. This makes our potential leaders to go into any form of agreement with their godfathers, so as to cling to powers against the wishes of the electorates. In the light of the above, noted, the quest for power, which truncate the interest of the governed, is a direct evidence of endemic complicity and godfathers would naturally emerge because of the vulnerability of such disposition of powers (Nnamani, 2003).
- iv. Corruption is another contributing factor to the emergence of godfatherism, corruption now appears to have become a permanent feature of the Nigeria polity. The godfathers today are thriving on ill-gotten wealth acquired under questionable circumstances, majority of them are fraudsters, drug barons, government contractor and the likes (Nnamani (2003).
- v. Lastly, politics of godfatherism thrives because it is a profit making venture. Godfathers often invest a lot of resources to ensure the electoral victory of their godsons, with the intention of getting profit later.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined godfatherism as political ideology that promotes exclusion and denial of citizen's fundamental and legitimate entitlement on the grounds that they are not shareholders in the business of breeding godsons and putting them into public offices. The paper reveals that the practice of godfatherism has no doubt led to the erosion of the normative elements of democracy which is central to the growth and stability of democratic survival in the country.



The findings of the study reveals that the practice of godfatherism showcases politics as a civil engagement to an enterprise where the mighty and influential are the beneficiaries of the dividends of democracy. This is against the principle and practice of democracy. The godfather and godson usually initiate a relationship that appears like friendship. But in actual sense, it is never so. It is simply a utility friendship. This is because the aim of both is gain and profit. The godfather takes advantage of the relationship to maximize profit and the godson gains advantage over others through the manipulation of the godfather. The paper argued that godsons often times, have failed in fulfilling their own part of the bargain as they always turned around to bite the fingers that fed them. The godfathers on the other hand are so dreaded that voters dare not vote against their wishes. The godfathers often use hoodlums to unleash terror on the citizens and godson. This notwithstanding, the paper argued that public office holders we their positions to the efforts of a godfather. This has made the godson often to misappropriate public funds in an effort to satisfy the neck breaking financial obligations of the godfather. The paper concludes that godfatherism is anti-thesis to the survival of democracy in Nigeria and as such should be rejected by all.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested;

- i. There should be public orientation and enlightenment by the National Orientation Agency (NOA) on the dangers and consequences of political godfatherism.
- ii. Poverty must be reduced by the government so that the electorate should not sell their consciences by voting wrong candidates into power as presumed by godfathers.
- iii. There should be massive employment for the youths because an idle mind is a devil's workshop. Godfathers often recruits jobless youths for election rigging.
- iv. All political parties should reduce the cost amount of obtaining party nomination forms because most credible candidates cannot afford such money and as such resort to godfathers that are financially buoyant, who often have their ways by sponsoring their candidates.
- v. Public offices should be seen as an opportunity to serve and not to be served. It should not be seen as an investment avenue, but rather an opportunity to serve and affect people's life. So, political office holders deceit from godfathers in order not to misappropriate public funds.

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