

ELITE DOMINANCE AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Democracy in the Third World countries including Nigeria has not been on steady movement since its adoption. The roles of elites on democratic stagnation or consolidation cannot be overemphasised. Nigeria's democratic experience is significantly shaped by the actions and interests of elites, who often prioritize personal and group benefits over institutional and national development. Using the Elite theoretical framework, the paper examines the challenges posed by elite dominance in Nigeria's democratic political system and explores the prospects for democratic consolidation. While the study adopts Expo-Facto design and relied on secondary data (books, journal articles, conference papers, internet materials etc.) subjected to content validity, before analyzing qualitatively. Some of the study's findings are that, Nigeria's democracy is not consolidating despite periodic elections and that, elitism is the cause of Nigeria's democratic stagnation. The study however recommends massism, meaning emergence and dominance of the masses in Nigeria's democratic system, strong democratic institution, and independent candidates to contest all elections among others.

Keynote: Elitism, Democracy, Democratic Consolidation. Nigeria

Introduction

Elite dominance is a theory which defines society based on power structure according to which the society runs. Smita (2023) insists that society has and can never be equal, as society is formed of different individuals who have different qualities, abilities, and psychology.' According to elite thinkers, every society is divided into two groups, that is, the ruling class and the ruled class (Mosca, 1939). Mosca argued that the elites are the organized minority that rules, and masses are the unorganized majority that is being ruled by the elites. This impression has had significant impacts on the various systems of government adopted by states especially democracy.

Democracy however, has been adopted by many nations and states as the favourite system of government but its consolidation remains a challenge in many developing countries, including Nigeria. The continuous dominance of elites over political and economic institutions raises concerns about the extent to which democracy can be sustained and institutionalized. Today, even states that do not apply democratic tenets are claiming to be practicing democracy thereby making democratisation or democratic consolidation difficult or problematic. It is against this backdrop that this study examines how elite dominance affects Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

Statement of Problem

Nigeria's democratic journey has not been a smooth one, Nigeria got independence in 1960 and a republic in 1963 and after three years her democratic foundation was cut-off by military

incursion in 1966, 1970, 1983, 1985, 1993 and 1998 until 1999 that Nigeria returned to democratic rule. Since then, her democracy has been characterised by elite's dominance which has rendered democratic institutions weak, rule of law a mirage, mass participation and inclusive government perpetual prayer point of the people. The democracy, apart from a periodic elections which allows the masses to choose one elite from the elite's structures has made Nigeria one of the democratic countries that does not practice democratic tenets thereby suffocating the democracy to democratize. It is on this premise that this study examines elite's dominance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Objectives

- i. To find out whether elite's dominance affects democratisation in Nigeria.
- ii. To examine whether or not Nigeria's democracy is consolidating.
- iii. To enumerate factors affecting Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

Literature Review

The Concept of Elitism

Elitism is a political and sociological theory that emphasizes the role of group or individuals, known as elites, in shaping and controlling society. This concept suggests that power and influence are concentrated in the hands of a small group of people who possess superior attributes such as wealth, intelligence, education, or social status. Elitism can be observed in various domains, including politics, economics, academia, religion and culture. Elitism can also be the belief or practice that certain individuals or groups, due to their inherent qualities or achievements, should hold greater influence or control over decision-making processes in society (Higley & Burton, 2006). The elite class is often distinguished by its access to resources, specialized knowledge, or social networks that provide comparative advantages over the general population. According to Pareto (1968), elites are composed of those who excel in their respective fields and rise to positions of power through a process he referred to as the "circulation of elites." This means that while elite groups may change over time, the structure of elite dominance remains intact. C. Wright Mills (1956) further expanded on this idea in his work *The Power Elite*, where he argued that the U.S. is governed by a small group of military, corporate, and political leaders who shape national policies to serve their interests rather than those of the masses. The concept is as factual as figures because in every society including Nigeria there is always individuals or group of individuals mostly minority who rule the vast majority. In the case of Nigeria, they are mostly military, privileged political class, economic moguls, academia, religious and traditional leaders whose actions and inactions have shaped our democracy and democratisation.

Brief History of Elitism

The philosophical foundation of elitism can be found in one of the oldest systematic works "The Republic", in which Plato talks about dividing the society into three groups, based on its qualitative characteristics: virtue. According to Plato, the Guardian class or the Philosopher king is the only one who is well-trained in the art of leadership and governance and should have absolute authority because philosopher king is competent enough to work in favor of people,

instead of self. Popkin & Stroll put it clearly thus; “Plato talks about three classes, the Guardian class is rational and trained in the art of leadership, Warrior class is driven by its spirit to fight and protect people, and Producer class is the one dependent on its appetite, having no spirit or leadership quality, they are governed and protected by guardian and warrior class, (Popkin & Stroll, 2009).” According to Plato, a just society can only be established when the members of society follow their virtue without interfering into other virtue which they do not fall into. The above assertion means that the elites are supposed to be leading while the masses are to be following.

Bolarinwa & Osuji re-presented a society characterized by elitism after the era of Plato’s ‘Republic’ when they argued that; in the middle age, a complex relation between the spiritual (Pope) and secular (Emperor) authorities also reflect upon the existence of elite power structure that ran in close ties. Although, they often clashed to reinforce themselves as higher and absolute authority, yet they function in close connection and controlled state, resources, people, and their psychology (Bolarinwa & Osuji, 2022).

Another evidence of elitism up till the contemporary societies is the pragmatic explanation of the emergence of modern state by Social Contract Theorists. The Contractarians presented the ideas of ‘who should rule’ and who should be ruled. Although they have theoretical dissimilarity, yet they had one similarity, that is, they all believed in the need for a man or group of men to lead others. Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, etc. agreed that there should be a special group or individual who should rule. For instance, J.J. Rousseau asserts that sovereignty resides in the general will. Yet to answer, ‘who should rule?’ he proposes governance models based on population of society. He recommends participatory democracy for small size population, aristocracy for medium size population, and monarchical system for large scale population (Bolarinwa & Osuji, 2022). Up till today, societies including Nigeria are based on the constructions of contractarians and characterized by elitism or elite’s dominance.

Elites Recruitment in Nigeria

Political elite recruitment is the way individuals or groups gain power and become part of the elite structure. According to Smita, (2023), political elite recruitment can be seen in three contexts, such as traditional patrimonial society or pre-colonial era; the colonial era; and post-colonial era.

Traditional Patrimonial Society or Pre-Colonial Era. The process of elite recruitment is well rooted in human history and exists, more or less, in all societies. For instance, people lived communal life in ancient time in history where they lived simple, peaceful, and egalitarian life. However, greediness and other factors ensued and patrimonial society emerged, then the question for future successor came into existence. A patrimonial society is ruled by one ruler (called king or chief), and he exerts his authority over his subject. The king was often seen as divine king or personality who can establish connection between God and masses. Thus, king was supported by tradition and religious belief as Rothman, (2001) agreed. Traditionally, the elder son was usually the successor of the king, he was nominated or selected amongst the direct hereditary son of the king. Usually, a male child assumed throne after the demise of

Patrimonial head. Thus elite recruitment based on Hereditary System was established in majority of kingdoms, as an effective way to keep Power Elites under Royal hierarchy and to forestall the issue related to elite recruitment crisis. However, the elite recruitment system to maintain social peace was reported to be ineffective as Smita (2022) submitted. There were instances of clash among ambitious male children of the King for throne which often led to bloody wars and recruitment crisis in many Kingdoms. Thus, the ineffectiveness of the recruitment system in the pre-colonial era led to the formation of variety of state and non-state bodies.

Colonial Era: During this era, the traditional patrimonial society came in contact with the colonial elites and the society underwent some notable changes with the introduction of Christianity by the colonial Christian missionaries. Modern education was introduced, some privileged ones were picked to be educated in modern schools and subsequently incorporated in the new elites' structure. Vine, remarked that; as they got education and were skilled, they acquired prestigious positions in various spheres of government such as legislature, and executive. Yet essentially acquired positions in the colonial administration as bureaucrats. They worked as loyalist of colonial power and focused on its benefits, (Vine, 2014).

Post-Colonial Era: This is the era when Nigeria got Independence and became a Republic. Nigeria's elite recruitment was characterized by constant overthrow of civilian government by military, since the first Republic to third republic. Between 1960 and 1999, Nigeria's elite structure was dominated by the military. In other words, the elite recruitment revolved around military and civilian institutions. Nigeria's fourth Republic came into existence in 1999 now with 26 years without military incursion but the elite structure was not without the military and characterised by political exclusion in a democratic state. However, I agree with Omodia when the scholar insisted that 'elite recruitment in Nigeria occurs through various channels, including electoral politics, political appointments, bureaucratic promotions, and traditional leadership structures, (Omodia, 2011).

The Concept of Democracy and Democratic Consolidation

Democracy like other social science concepts has no one agreed definition. What I think is important, is that, the definition one chooses, should be in context. In accordance with my study, democracy can be seen to a system of government in which power is vested in the people, who exercise it directly or through political elites called elected representatives. It is characterized by principles such as political pluralism, free and fair elections, rule of law, and protection of fundamental rights (Dahl, 2020). Liberal democracy emphasizes constitutionalism, rule of law, and the protection of human rights, distinguishing it from illiberal democracies where elections occur but civil liberties are restricted (Zakaria, 1997). The definition above presents the direction of this paper whereby it means that democracy is not adopted to dismantle elites but to ensure fairness, inclusiveness and popular participation of every qualified person in the affairs of the society. However, the case in Nigeria is different, the elites, stifled inclusiveness and popular participation thereby making democratisation difficult.

Democratic Consolidation on the other hand refers to the process through which democracy becomes stable, deeply institutionalized, and unlikely to revert to authoritarianism. Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that a democracy is consolidated when it becomes "the only game in town," meaning no major political actors seek to overthrow it, and democratic norms are internalized within society. Like Schedler would say, democratisation is when political actors accept democratic rules and institutions as the legitimate framework for governance (Schedler, 2001). In nut shell, democratic consolidation is when everyone including the elites accept democratic rules and institutions as the legitimate framework for governance, without this acceptance, democratic consolidation might not be achieved.

Determinants of Democratic Consolidation

The determinants of democratic consolidation are the key factors that contribute to the stability, resilience, and sustainability of democratic governance. Scholars had identified some interrelated factors that indicate whether a democracy matures and resists democratic stagnation or backsliding. Some of the determinants are categorized as follows:

i. Political and Institutional Determinants

- a. **Strong Institutions:** The presence of independent institutions, such as a robust judiciary, electoral commissions, executive, and a functioning legislature, helps consolidate democracy. Like Acemoglu & Robinson argued, 'institutions must ensure checks and balances to prevent autocratic tendencies' (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006). Simply put in my own imagination, 'bigmanism must not prevail over institutionalism'
- b. **Rule of Law:** Just as democracy would hardly be understood without constitutionalism and freedom, so also its consolidation cannot be clearly noticed if there is problem of rule of law and freedom to choose and participate. I think that is why O'Donnell insists that, a legal framework that guarantees civil liberties, protects human rights, and upholds contracts, strengthens democratic consolidation (O'Donnell, 1996).
- c. **Electoral Integrity:** Like constitutionalism and freedom, electoral integrity which respects voters' choice and increase participation in subsequent elections is another major condition or determinant of democratic consolidation. No wonder Diamond, (1999), remarked that, free, fair, and transparent elections enhance legitimacy and public trust in democratic governance (Diamond, 1999).
- d. **Good Governance:** Good governance is one of the pragmatic important determinants of democratic consolidation. If democracy would not ensure good live of people, what is the essence of its adoption and continuation? Hence, democracy that bedeviled with bad governance is far from consolidation.

ii. Economic Determinants

- a. **Economic Development:** One of the conditions for democratisation is economic prosperity. That is why Lipset stated that, higher levels of economic prosperity, often measured by GDP per capita, are associated with greater democratic stability (Lipset, cited in Smita, 2022).

- b. **Economic Equality:** High levels of inequality can lead to social unrest and weaken democratic institutions, while a more equal distribution of wealth fosters stability (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006).
- c. **Diversified Economy:** Democracies with a well-diversified economy are less vulnerable to economic crises that could lead to authoritarian tendencies (Przeworski et al., 2000).

iii. Social Determinants

- a. **Education and Literacy:** A well-educated population tends to support democratic norms and participate actively in governance (Glaeser et al., 2007).
- b. **Civil Society and Media Freedom:** A strong civil society, including independent media and NGOs, acts as a watchdog against government abuses (Putnam, 1993).
- d. **Ethnic and Religious Cohesion:** Societies with high levels of ethnic and religious fragmentation may struggle with democratic consolidation unless inclusive policies are in place (Lijphart, 1999).

iv. Historical and International Determinants

- a. **Democratic History:** Countries with a history of democratic governance are more likely to consolidate democracy than those with prolonged authoritarian rule (Huntington, 1991).
- b. **International Influence:** Foreign aid, diplomatic pressure, and international organizations (such as the EU or UN) can play a role in supporting democratic consolidation (Levitsky & Way, 2010).
- c. **Regional Democratic Norms:** Democracies in regions with other consolidated democracies are more likely to remain stable due to positive external influences (Boix, 2011).

Elite Theory

This study is anchored on elite theory. The Elite framework according to Tamuno, (2021) was fathered by the likes of Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels and Lasswell. It is a political science and sociology framework that asserts that power is concentrated in the hands of a small, privileged group often referred to as "the elite" who influences political and economic outcomes in the society. In international relations, elite is used to refer to the states whose politics, economy, military and other international sphere are developed

The basic Assumption of the Theory

Some of the basis assumption of the theory are;

- a. That in every society or international system, there is always a small group of individuals or states (elite) who rule over the majority and control key political, economic, and social institutions, and making decisions that shape society.
- b. That, power is not equally distributed in any society or system but is concentrated in the hands of the elites.
- c. That, although there may be internal competition, but elites generally share common interests and work together to achieve and maintain their dominance.

- d. That, the masses are not involved in political decision-making, often due to lack of unity, resources, knowledge, or interest.
- e. That, while individual members of the elite may change, but the structure of elites remain intact, with new elites emerging from within the existing system rather than from the general population.
- f. That, even in democratic societies, true decision-making is controlled by elites, elections and public participation often serving as symbolic rather than substantive means of influence.

Application of the theory

The assumptions above are prevalent evidence in most societies including Nigerian. The theory further disagree with the idea that democracy ensures equal power distribution, instead arguing that real power remains in the hands of a few, regardless of formal democratic institutions. The framework is useful in analysing Nigeria's democratic experience as the said democracy struggles to democratize and faced with good governance and other challenges.

Nigeria's democracy is often characterized by elite dominance, where a small group of political, military, economic, social, educational and religious elites control the state's resources and decision-making processes. I support the view of Claude Ake when he said that 'despite democratic elections, the elite influence institutions, manipulate electoral processes, and restrict political participation for ordinary citizens' (Ake, 1996). That is the situation in Nigeria where the democracy is not for the people but for the elites thereby suffocating it to literally breathe and holistically breathe well.

Another manifestation of elitism in Nigeria's democracy is the evidence of weak democratic institutions which make the democratic institutions subservient to individuals or group of individuals because of perceived personal or group interest. A case in point is the incessant judicial shenanigans where Courts of coordinate jurisdiction giving contradicting verdict on the same matter including Supreme Court giving opposing judgment on the matter that is clearly stated in the 1999 Constitution as amended and contradicting the precedence she had set. For examples, Ondo State in 2015 took Federal Government to Court over the issue of non-payment her monthly subvention and the Supreme Court of Nigeria held that the Federal Government has no constitutional power to withhold statutory allocations due to a state government and that withholding funds of federating unit violates the principles of fiscal federalism and financial autonomy of states as guaranteed by the Constitution as in sec 120 and 162. The current Supreme Court judgment in the case of Rivers State is a clear evident of weak democratic institutions. Has the sections the Supreme Court relied on in 2015 changed?

Also, the issue of the legislature being controlled by the executive to the extent of being tagged as a rubber-stamp legislature constitute hindrance to Nigeria's democratisation. Rather than fostering inclusive governance, Nigerian democracy tends to serve elite interests, with policies often designed to benefit those in power rather than the broader population.

Criticism

Be that as it may, the theory is not perfect, it has faced various criticism. For instance, the theory is challenged by its oversimplifying complex social structures and underestimating the agency of non-elite actors. Engelstad insists that the theory might not fully account for instances where grassroots movements effect significant change, suggesting a need for a more nuanced application of the theory (Engelstad, 2009). Despite these criticism, the elites framework is relevant to my work and has evidently analysed challenges facing Nigeria's democracy.

Methodology

This study adopted expo facto design and relied on secondary data (books, journal articles, conference papers, internet materials etc.) subjected to content validity, before analyzing qualitatively. The use of qualitative analysis helped the researcher to embark on an indebt study of elitism and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Impacts of Elites on Democratic Consolidation

Elites in Nigeria have played a central roles in shaping Nigeria's democracy and its institutions which however have significant impacts on democratisation through the followings as observed by scholars:

- a. Electoral Manipulation: One of the impacts of elites on Nigeria's democracy and its consolidation is the issue of electoral manipulation. The elites usually use all midst including financial and institutional power to confuse electoral outcome and discourage popular participation. The 2023 Presidential elections is a clear evidence of electoral manipulation where Presidential and National Assembly elections were held concurrently but the same network used to upload National Assembly's poling unit results in real-time on iRev database refused to upload that of Presidential results in real-time. No wonder Ibrahim and Egwu, (2005), remarked that 'political elites use financial and institutional power to rig elections, intimidate opponents, and control electoral bodies.'
- b. Clientelism and Patronage: The distribution of state resources based on loyalty rather than merit weakens democratic accountability (Omotola, 2009).
- d. Weak Institutional Development: Elite interference in the judiciary, legislature, and security agencies prevents the establishment of independent democratic institutions (Diamond, 1999).

Challenges to Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

The impacts of elite's dominance on Nigeria's democracy has posed enormous challenges to her democratic consolidation. Some challenges are discussed bellow;

- a. Elite Fragmentation and Power Struggles: Nigeria's elite class is often divided along ethnic, religious, and regional lines, leading to political instability and weak governance (Suberu, 2007). These divisions foster elite-driven conflicts that undermine national unity and democratic progress.
- b. Corruption and Rent-Seeking Behavior: Political elites in Nigeria prioritize personal enrichment over national development. Corruption, embezzlement, and rent-seeking

behaviors deplete state resources, reducing the effectiveness of democratic governance (Olayiwola & Okorie, 2010).

- c. **Electoral Violence and Political Thuggery:** Elite-backed political violence, including the use of thugs and militias, disrupts democratic processes, discourages political participation, and fosters insecurity (Agbaje & Adejumobi, 2006).

Prospects for Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Despite the challenges posed by elite dominance, there are prospects for democratic consolidation in Nigeria:

- i. **Strengthening Democratic Institutions:** Reforming key institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), judiciary, and legislature can reduce elite interference in governance (Linz & Stepan, 1996).
- ii. **Electoral Reforms Serious:** Transparent electoral processes, independent election monitoring, and the adoption of electronic voting can minimize elite-driven electoral fraud and enhance public confidence in democracy (Ojo, 2007).
- iii. **Independent candidate.** When independent candidate is constitutionally allowed in Nigeria's elections, that would begin the gradual collapse of elite's dominance and by the time an independent candidate won a major election, one of the pillars aiding elite structures will be broken thereby allowing democratisation an opportunity to breath.
- iv. **Constitutional review.** Nigeria's democratic consolidation is possible if some anti-democratisation sections are reviewed in both the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria and Electoral Acts. For instance, the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria as amended, Article 65 (1)(b) puts forward a compulsory provision that "a person can only contest election for Senate or House of Representative only if that person is a member of a political party and is sponsored by that political party." This kind of sections cannot democratize a democracy of our own. A democracy which in reality gives the masses a choice to choose one elite among the elites. Thus, despite conducting democratic election, the Nigerian electoral system reflects itself as the elite's government.
- v. **Anti-Corruption Measures:** Strengthening anti-corruption agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the rest and ensuring elite accountability can curb corruption and promote democratic stability (Transparency International, 2021).
- vi. **Rule of law.** The laws in Nigeria must be functional and seen to be applied to everyone irrespective of past and present position, religion or region.

Finding and Discussion

The study based on the objectives found the followings:

- i. **That, Nigeria's democracy is not consolidating.** This finding is based on the fact that periodic elections do not guarantee democratic consolidation as argued by the likes of Diamond, (2001), Lary, (2003), shumpeter, (1991) among others. Though, Nigeria has enjoyed periodic elections since 1999 but her democracy is far from consolidation as the determinants of democratic consolidation such as strong democratic institutions, rule of

law, inclusive government, free and fair elections, good governance, well fair of citizens among others are not prioritised.

- ii. **Elite dominance is the cause of democratic stagnation in Nigeria.** Elite theory is literally opposed to democratic principles. Democracy is popularly believed to be the government of the people, by the people and for the people but the elite's principle is a chap negation to such democratic notions. So long elites' interests are visibly rated above national development, jeopardised rule of law, suppressed public opinion, among others, this finding is valid, critical examples are; declaration of state of emergency and unlawful removal of elected officials, elite based policies, bad governance which has increased poverty and widen in-equality gap.
- iii. **Nigeria's democracy is inherently against democratic consolidation.** The democracy was fashioned after elite's interest. Section 65. Subsection (2) (b) is a case in point. The section legally disqualify masses' participation in the major governance. The section says, "A person shall be qualified for election under subsection one of this section if he is a member of political party and is sponsored by that party." The masses cannot afford political party's aspirant forms let alone withstand the usual manipulative selection process. This is outright anti-masses participation in major governance. It only creates systemic chance for the masses to democratically choose one elite among the elites.

Conclusion

Elite dominance remains a significant obstacle to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Political elites continue to dominate governance structures, often prioritizing personal and group interests over national democratic growth and development. However, institutional reforms, electoral transparency, civic engagement, and anti-corruption initiatives present viable pathways for deepening democracy. Addressing elite dominance through inclusive governance mechanisms is crucial for achieving sustainable democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The study recommends among the followings

- i. **Determinants of democratic consolidation** such as strong democratic institutions, rule of law, inclusive government, free and fair elections, good governance, well fair of citizens and viable separation of power, among others should be prioritised.
- ii. **Massism.** This means the emergence and dominance of masses in a democratic political environment. Just like the elites, Massism is possible. The masses can also unite and their take rightful position in Nigeria's democracy. End SARs agitation, hunger protests or end bad governance protests etc are all symptoms of possibility of massism.
- iii. **Independent Candidate.** Independent candidate should be allowed in all elections. When independent candidates are allowed to contest elections, which would begin the gradual collapse of elite dominance and by the time independent candidates won major elections, one of the pillars holding elites' structure would be broken.
- iv. **Outlaw Ward and Local Government Election Collation processes.** Most of the electoral manipulations during elections happen during ward or local government

collation processes. Poling Unit results should be used and be uploaded in real time to INEC's iver for State and National collation, and announcement of State and National results respectively.

- v. **Outright Constitutional Review.** The current 1999 constitution as amended needs to be out rightly reviewed.

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