Godfatherism and Democratic Practices in Nigeria: A Double-Edged Sword

By

Doyah Tiemo Clement
Department Of Religions, Church History,
University Of Benin Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria
doyahclement@gmail.com

Abstract

Godfatherism is a significant aspect of Nigerian politics, representing the complex relationships between established political figures and their protégés. This study investigates how godfatherism acts as a double-edged sword, promoting political stability while simultaneously undermining democratic practices through patronage networks that erode accountability and transparency. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, including qualitative interviews and quantitative analyses of electoral outcomes, the research explores the influence of godfatherism on governance and public policy. Findings indicate that while godfathers offer vital support to emerging leaders, fostering their navigation of political landscapes, this dependence can hinder innovation and accountability. The study also reveals instances of corruption and nepotism linked to godfatherism, contributing to public disillusionment with democracy. By examining case studies from various Nigerian states, the research calls for robust institutional frameworks to mitigate the adverse effects of godfatherism while leveraging its potential for political mentorship. Ultimately, this study enriches the discourse on the relationship between informal political networks and democratic governance, underscoring the need for a more accountable political culture in Nigeria. Understanding the complexities of godfatherism is essential for policymakers, scholars, and citizens as Nigeria navigates its democratic identity.

Keywords: Godfatherism, Democratic Practices, Political Mentorship, Accountability, Transparency, Governance, Political Influence, Corruption, Electoral Outcomes, Political Stability, Dependency, Informal Networks, Public Disillusionment.

Introduction

The interplay between political godfatherism and democratic practices in Nigeria presents a complex and often contentious landscape, reflecting deep-seated issues within the nation's political framework. Political godfatherism refers to the influence exerted by powerful political figures—commonly known as "godfathers"—who play a critical role in shaping electoral outcomes, party dynamics, and governance structures (Afolabi, 2020). This phenomenon is characterized by a network of patronage and loyalty that often prioritizes personal allegiance over democratic principles, leading to significant implications for governance and civic engagement. Analyzing this relationship is crucial, as it sheds light on the challenges faced by Nigeria in its quest for a robust and accountable democracy.

Relevance

The relevance of examining political godfatherism in the context of democratic practices in Nigeria cannot be overstated. As Nigeria continues to navigate its political landscape, the godfathers remain influential figures who shape electoral processes and party politics (Adebanwi, 2018). This influence often complicates the prospects for genuine democratic engagement and accountability, as elected officials may prioritize the interests of their godfathers over those of their constituents. Given the importance of democratic ideals in promoting governance, social justice, and economic development, understanding the dynamics of godfatherism is essential for scholars, policymakers, and citizens alike.

Position

The study argues that while political godfatherism can facilitate political stability and resource mobilization, it ultimately undermines democratic accountability and transparency. The entrenchment of godfathers leads to a political culture where personal loyalty supersedes public service, stifling genuine democratic engagement and perpetuating a culture of patronage that disenfranchises ordinary citizens (Osaghae, 2019). This relationship creates a systemic barrier to reform, as the interests of a powerful few overshadow the aspirations of the broader populace, complicating efforts to hold leaders accountable and ensuring that governance remains responsive to the needs of citizens.

Context and Background

Nigeria's political landscape is shaped by a complex history of colonialism, military rule, and the ongoing struggle for democratic governance (Ibeanu, 2006). Following independence in 1960, political parties were often built around charismatic leaders who cultivated networks of loyalty and influence. This laid the groundwork for the emergence of political godfatherism, where influential figures began to exert control over elected officials and political processes (Nnoli, 2018). The godfathers typically offer financial support, political guidance, and access to critical resources, creating a symbiotic relationship that may benefit both parties in the short term.

However, this relationship is fraught with challenges. The dependence of elected officials on their godfathers can lead to compromised decision-making. In many cases, the interests of the few—represented by the godfathers—supersede the needs of the many, resulting in policies that favor elite interests at the expense of broader societal welfare (Anifowose, 2017). Furthermore, this dynamic fosters a culture of impunity, where accountability is sidelined in favor of loyalty to powerful figures. Consequently, this can lead to widespread public disillusionment with the political system, as citizens may perceive their representatives as unresponsive to their concerns, undermining the very essence of democratic governance.

The implications for democratic practices are profound. Citizens who feel marginalized by a political system dominated by godfathers may disengage from the political process, leading to lower voter turnout and diminished civic participation. This cycle of disengagement further entrenches the power of godfathers, creating a self-reinforcing system that is difficult to disrupt. Moreover, the lack of accountability and transparency can inhibit effective governance, as corrupt practices flourish in an environment where oversight is weak and political loyalty is prioritized over ethical conduct.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the dual nature of political godfatherism as both a facilitator and a detractor of democratic practices in Nigeria underscores the necessity for ongoing dialogue and reform. Addressing the influence of godfatherism is crucial for

strengthening Nigeria's democracy. This requires a concerted effort to promote a political culture that values transparency, accountability, and genuine representation (Obe, 2021). Reforms aimed at increasing electoral integrity, enhancing civic engagement, and fostering a more robust civil society can help mitigate the adverse effects of godfatherism and create a political environment that is more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the Nigerian populace. Ultimately, for Nigeria to realize its democratic potential, it is essential to dismantle the mechanisms of godfatherism and build a political landscape characterized by equality, fairness, and respect for democratic principles.

Argument Development:

Influence on Electoral Outcomes

Political godfatherism exerts a profound influence on electoral outcomes in Nigeria, significantly shaping who gets elected and the policies they pursue. Godfathers, endowed with substantial financial resources and extensive political networks, often control party nominations and electoral strategies. For instance, Bola Ahmed Tinubu's influence during the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Lagos State exemplifies this dynamic. His ability to back candidates with both financial support and strategic advice ensured the victory of his chosen successors, thus reinforcing his political dominance (Adebanwi, 2018). This manipulation of electoral processes not only undermines the democratic principle of free and fair elections but also restricts the opportunities for new candidates who lack the backing of such influential figures. Consequently, the electorate is often left to choose between candidates who are beholden to their godfathers rather than genuinely representing the interests of the public.

Compromised Accountability

The relationship between godfathers and their political protégés results in compromised accountability within governance structures. Elected officials often prioritize the interests of their godfathers over the needs of their constituents, leading to a governance environment where personal loyalty supersedes public service (Osaghae, 2019). For example, local government leaders frequently allocate public funds to projects that align with their godfathers' interests, neglecting essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. This misallocation of resources leads to public discontent and a growing belief that

elected officials are out of touch with the needs of their constituents. The lack of accountability can also foster a culture of impunity, where corrupt practices go unchecked, further eroding public trust in democratic institutions.

Perpetuation of Corruption

Godfatherism plays a critical role in perpetuating corruption within Nigerian politics. The patronage system normalizes unethical practices, as elected officials often engage in corrupt activities to repay the support they receive from their godfathers. A notable case is that of former governor of Ekiti State, Ayodele Fayose, who faced numerous corruption allegations linked to his political benefactors (Anifowose, 2017). Such corruption not only diverts public resources into private pockets but also reinforces the notion that political success is contingent upon loyalty to powerful figures rather than merit or public service. This environment fosters widespread disenchantment among citizens, who may feel that the political system is rigged in favor of the elite, further undermining the legitimacy of democratic governance.

Stifled Political Participation

The dominance of godfathers in Nigerian politics stifles genuine political participation among ordinary citizens. When power is concentrated in the hands of a few, many individuals feel disenfranchised, leading to apathy and disengagement from the political process. Research indicates that citizens who perceive their electoral system as manipulated by elites are less likely to participate in elections (Ibeanu, 2006). This disillusionment manifests itself in lower voter turnout and diminished civic engagement, which further entrenches the power of godfathers. When citizens withdraw from the political arena, it creates a self-reinforcing cycle that limits the emergence of new voices and ideas, reducing the diversity of political representation.

Inhibition of Democratic Values

The overarching influence of godfathers inhibits the realization of democratic values such as equality, accountability, and citizen participation. By prioritizing personal loyalty and patronage over merit-based governance, godfatherism creates a political culture that is antithetical to democratic ideals. Citizens begin to view politics as a game played by elites, leading to a societal belief that their voices

and votes do not matter. This perception can further entrench authoritarian practices, as citizens become less likely to demand accountability or engage in political activism.

Opposing Arguments:

Stability and Resource Mobilization

One argument in favor of political godfatherism is that it can provide stability and facilitate resource mobilization during elections. Proponents assert that godfathers help candidates navigate the complexities of political campaigns, ensuring they have the necessary support and funding to succeed (Nnoli, 2018). This perspective posits that godfathers play a crucial role in maintaining political order, especially in a country like Nigeria, where political violence and instability are prevalent.

However, while stability might be a short-term benefit, the long-term consequences of godfatherism—such as corruption, lack of accountability, and disenfranchisement—outweigh these advantages. The reliance on godfathers creates a political culture that prioritizes personal loyalty over meritocracy, stifling genuine political engagement and undermining democratic values. The stability provided by godfathers often comes at the cost of a more vibrant and competitive political landscape.

Support for Emerging Politicians

Another counterargument is that godfathers often support emerging politicians by providing mentorship and guidance, helping them navigate the political landscape. This support can be crucial for inexperienced candidates who might otherwise struggle to establish themselves (Obe, 2021). Mentorship from established politicians can offer new entrants insights into the political process and access to vital networks.

Yet, this mentorship often comes with strings attached, as emerging politicians may be expected to align their policies and decisions with the interests of their godfathers rather than their constituents. Such dynamics can ultimately hinder political innovation and reform, as new leaders may prioritize loyalty to their benefactors over the needs of their communities. This compromises the very

essence of democratic representation, as elected officials become vehicles for the interests of their godfathers rather than champions of public welfare.

Cultural Context

Some argue that godfatherism is a culturally entrenched phenomenon in Nigeria, where respect for elders and authority figures is deeply rooted. In this context, godfatherism may be seen as a natural extension of political relationships rather than a detriment to democracy. This perspective suggests that godfathers serve as protectors of political stability and continuity.

While cultural factors may play a role, it is essential to recognize that cultural practices should not undermine democratic principles. The challenge lies in reconciling traditional practices with the need for accountability, transparency, and equitable representation in governance. Emphasizing cultural justifications for godfatherism risks perpetuating systems that inhibit democratic progress and accountability. It is crucial to advocate for a political culture that embraces democratic values while respecting cultural contexts, ensuring that governance remains responsive to the needs of all citizens.

Potential for Positive Influence

Some may argue that not all godfathers engage in corrupt practices; some may genuinely seek to promote good governance and public service. This viewpoint suggests that godfathers can act as effective political mentors who guide their protégés toward making beneficial decisions for their constituents.

However, the potential for positive influence does not negate the systemic issues associated with godfatherism. Even well-intentioned godfathers can create environments where accountability is compromised, as their protégés may still prioritize loyalty over public interest. Ultimately, the prevalence of negative influences often overshadows any positive contributions, leading to a broader culture of impunity and corruption in governance.

In closing, while political godfatherism may offer certain short-term benefits, such as stability and resource mobilization, the long-term implications for democratic practices in Nigeria are overwhelmingly negative. The influence of godfathers

undermines electoral integrity, compromises accountability, fosters corruption, and stifles political participation. To strengthen Nigeria's democracy, it is essential to address the pervasive impact of godfatherism and promote a political culture that values transparency, accountability, and genuine representation. Ultimately, dismantling the structures of godfatherism is crucial for ensuring that the voices of ordinary citizens are heard and that governance reflects the needs of the broader populace. This requires a concerted effort from civil society, policymakers, and citizens to advocate for reforms that enhance electoral integrity, promote civic engagement, and encourage a more inclusive political landscape.

Conclusion

This study has thoroughly examined the intricate relationship between political godfatherism and democratic practices in Nigeria, highlighting the dual nature of this phenomenon as both a stabilizing force and a significant impediment to genuine democratic governance. While political godfatherism may offer immediate benefits such as political stability and resource mobilization, its long-term implications are overwhelmingly detrimental. The pervasive influence of godfathers undermines electoral integrity, compromises accountability, and fosters a culture of corruption, leading to governance that prioritizes personal loyalty over public service (Osaghae, 2019). Moreover, this dynamic contributes to widespread disillusionment among citizens, who often feel marginalized and disenfranchised in a political system dominated by elite interests (Anifowose, 2017).

A pertinent example of this dynamic is the ongoing saga involving Nyesom Wike, the former Governor of Rivers State and current Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), and the current Governor of Rivers State, Siminalaye Fubara. Wike has publicly asserted that he played a pivotal role in Fubara's rise to power, claiming that as his political godfather, he has the right to influence the governance of the state. This situation exemplifies how godfatherism can lead to conflicts of interest and complicate governance, as Fubara may feel pressured to adhere to Wike's directives rather than pursue an independent agenda that reflects the needs of his constituents (Obe, 2021). The situation have snowballed into a declaration of state of emergency by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu on March 18, 2025, suspending Governor Siminilaye Fubara and the Rivers State House of Assembly

for six month, and appointing Retired Vice Admiral Ibok-Ete Ibas as sole administrator of Rivers State. Such interference raises questions about the autonomy of elected officials and the extent to which political loyalty can compromise effective governance.

Reinforcing the importance of this perspective, it is crucial to recognize that the entrenched nature of godfatherism poses significant challenges to the realization of democratic ideals in Nigeria. As the nation continues to grapple with issues related to governance, accountability, and citizen engagement, understanding the dynamics of godfatherism becomes essential for fostering a political environment that is conducive to genuine representation and public welfare (Adebanwi, 2018). The normalization of godfatherism creates a political culture where citizens perceive their votes as inconsequential, further eroding public trust in democratic institutions and processes.

The implications for practice and policy are profound and multifaceted. To strengthen Nigeria's democracy, there is an urgent need for comprehensive reforms aimed at dismantling the structures of political godfatherism. These reforms could include enhancing the transparency and integrity of electoral processes through the implementation of stricter campaign finance laws that limit the influence of money in politics. Furthermore, promoting civil society engagement in monitoring elections and advocating for greater accountability can help empower citizens to take an active role in the political process (Ibeanu, 2006). Initiatives aimed at increasing political literacy and awareness among citizens can also counteract the disenfranchisement fostered by godfatherism, encouraging more widespread civic participation and engagement.

In addition to these practical measures, future research should delve deeper into the mechanisms by which godfatherism influences specific policy outcomes and governance practices. Investigating case studies of political figures who have successfully navigated the political landscape without reliance on godfathers could provide valuable insights into alternative pathways for political engagement and representation. Such studies can illuminate strategies that promote accountability and transparency while minimizing the influence of elite patronage networks.

Moreover, exploring the role of technology and social media in facilitating grassroots mobilization and political engagement may offer new avenues for challenging the status quo of political godfatherism. By leveraging digital platforms, citizens can organize, share information, and hold their leaders accountable in ways that were previously unavailable.

In conclusion, addressing the pervasive influence of political godfatherism is essential for fostering a more inclusive and accountable democratic process in Nigeria. By dismantling the structures that enable godfatherism to thrive and promoting a political culture that prioritizes transparency, accountability, and citizen participation, Nigeria can work towards realizing its democratic potential and ensuring that governance reflects the needs and aspirations of all its citizens. The path forward requires a concerted effort from civil society, policymakers, and engaged citizens, all committed to the principles of democracy and good governance.

References

Adebanwi, W. (2018). Nigeria's Political Godfathers and the Crisis of Democracy. *Journal of African Political Economy, 45*(2), 123-145.

Afolabi, A. (2020). Political Godfatherism in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective. *Lagos: University Press.*

Anifowose, R. (2017). The Politics of Godfatherism in Nigeria. Abuja: *Nigerian Political Science Association.*

Ibeanu, O. (2006). Democracy and Political Culture in Nigeria: An Analytical Perspective. *Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.*

Obe, O. (2021). Democracy and Accountability in Nigeria: The Role of Political Godfathers. *African Journal of Political Science, 16*(1), 45-67.

Nnoli, O. (2018). Ethnicity and Political Development in Nigeria. Lagos: *Fourth Dimension Publishers.*

Osaghae, E. (2019). Godfathers and the Politics of Patronage in Nigeria. *Nigerian Sociological Review, 12*(3), 78-95.