

GODFATHERISM IN NIGERIAN POLITICS AND THE IDEALS OF MERITOCRACY FOR NATION BUILDING

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Abstract

Politics in Nigeria over the years have suffered from meritocracy especially at the level of appointments due to personal interest and other forms of affiliations. This paper will therefore examine the crisis of Godfatherism and the ideals meritocracy in Nigeria. This practice has undermined the principles of meritocracy encouraging corruption, and inefficiency in government appointments and has adversely affected nation building in all strata as it involves the appointment of individuals to positions of power based on their loyalty and connections to those in power, rather than their qualifications or merit. The paper argues that the roots of this crisis lie in the country's post-colonial history, where the emphasis on patronage and clientelism has perpetuated a system of privilege and exclusion instead of fair play and conscientiousness. It will also examine the ways in which the practice of meritocracy can justify national development against the danger of Godfatherism. The evidence from Nigeria's political history will be used to illustrate the consequences of this ugly practice and the harm it has caused over the years. The paper concludes that the crisis of Godfatherism in Nigeria can only be addressed by promoting a culture of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in the country's political institutions, if and only if we can build a democratic nation that can compete with the global world.

Keywords: Meritocracy, Godfatherism, political appointments, Nation Building, Nigeria.

Introduction

Meritocracy is a social system in which advancement in society is based on an individual's capabilities and merits rather than on the basis of family, wealth, or social background.¹ The idea of meritocracy has received much attention since British sociologist Michael Young first coined the term in 1958. In particular, meritocracy has increasingly been recognized as a positive system in Western societies, and the ideology has been tightly coupled with the notions of capitalism and egalitarian values, which are fundamental to the concept of the "American Dream". Meritocracy, the idea that individuals should be rewarded based on their talents and efforts, is a fundamental principle of modern societies.² It is expected to promote fairness, equality, and efficiency in the allocation of resources and opportunities. However, in Nigeria, the practice of meritocracy has been compromised by the pervasive influence of Godfatherism, particularly in the realm of political appointment.³ This is a form of African Godfatherism, and has become a dominant feature of Nigeria's political landscape.⁴ This practice involves the appointment of individuals to positions of power based on their loyalty and connections to those in power, rather than their qualifications or merit.⁵ The consequences of this practice are far-reaching, leading to a lack of, accountability, corruption, and inefficiency in government.⁶ This paper examines the crisis of meritocracy in Nigeria, highlighting the consequences of this practice on governance, accountability, and

development. It argues that Godfatherism undermines the principles of fairness, equality, and justice, ultimately threatening the legitimacy of Nigeria's political institutions.

Meritocracy in Nigeria: Practice and Praxis

Meritocracy is the idea that individuals should be rewarded based on their talents and efforts in appointment in order to promote fairness, equality, and efficiency in the allocation of resources and opportunities. It is a social system in which advancement in society is based on an individual's capabilities and merits rather than on the basis of family, wealth, or social background. The abuse of meritocracy in Nigeria refers to the erosion of the principle of meritocracy, where individuals are rewarded based on their connections, wealth, or other forms of privilege rather than their talents and efforts. Nigeria's predicament is the inability of the country to produce the foresighted and transformational leadership to resolve its inherent challenges like nepotism, tribalism, social injustice, indiscipline, corruption, religious crisis and the cult of mediocrity. Nigerian leaders over the years have failed the country, putting about 133 million Nigerians in multidimensional poverty. The country's national, state and local levels political processes have failed to produce the leadership essential to transform the visions of the founders of the country into reality. Political leadership has been misinterpreted to mean opportunity for personal aggrandizement and wealth accumulation for family members and friends. The benefits associated with political and elective offices are so attractive financially and commands influence in social status. This explains the reason why politicians are so desperate to win elections by all means including manipulating the electoral process among which is votes and delegates buying and bribing their way through the process.

The principle of meritocracy emphasizes the need to base appointments of persons into public and political offices on the grounds of merit, competence, qualification, integrity, and ability to deliver assigned tasks. This has been absent in the conduct of government business. Public managers of the country's affairs need to cultivate the culture of meritocracy. Awards of contracts, public procurements, and handling official matters should be based on the merit of cases. It is important that the political processes that produce political appointees should be transparent and tailored to produce competent personnel who have the mind to serve and lead for the good of the masses. To achieve this, those at the helm of affairs must as a matter of urgency adopt the due process principles and be conscientious in appointments. The process should be organized to produce servant leaders. Servant Leadership is a theory of leadership by Robert Greenleaf and it contends that the most effective and profitable leaders are servants of the masses/people. Servant leaders contribute to organisational growth and performance, societal stability and development through whole-hearted attention and devotion to followers and they deploy public, organisational and personal resources to meet the needs of their followers. Servant leaders are able to deliver the dividends of democracy based on their attachment to "collaboration, trust, empathy, and ethics".⁷ They demonstrate the ten features of servant leadership outlined by Larry Spears, namely, listening, healing, empathy, persuasion, awareness, foresight, conceptualization, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community. A leader that demonstrates the above leadership qualities will gain support, collaboration, solidarity, and engagement from the masses. The principle of meritocracy is enshrined in Plato's Republic, where he advocated for a society in which each individual belongs to one of three classes—rulers (philosophers), guardians (soldiers), and producers (farmers and craftsmen)—based on their natural talent, effort and abilities.⁸

It aptly assumed that when people occupied positions of influence, authority and power on the basis of their abilities, competence, integrity, knowledge and experience, it will translate to high performance for the benefit of the people, society and organization. We want to see this applied in Nigeria to promote the culture of quality assurance in the political, economic, educational, agricultural and banking sectors of the country. Appointment should not be based on whom you know or party affiliation but one's ability, integrity, achievement in past assignments, wealth of experience, competence, etc. The culture of Person-Job-Fit should be institutionalized and those make laws, public policies and implements them should occupy those positions on the bases of merit and not social status or family background. Several factors have contributed to the crisis of meritocracy in Nigeria, for example, Corruption affects most fabrics of the country and primarily accounts for the slow progress recorded in the socio-economic life of the country. A country cannot record significant progress in the midst of political and bureaucratic corruption. In the 2021 Transparency International Corruption Index, Nigeria ranked 154th in the 180 countries (with South Sudan ranked as the most corrupt (180th) and Denmark the least corrupt) (Transparency International, 2021). It is estimated that the country has lost over 400 USD to corruption since independence. Such amount if deployed to execution of public programmes and projects will transform the country to a greater height of development. Political and bureaucratic corruption is regarded as the primary obstacle preventing Nigeria from accomplishing its full potentials. Corruption has been categorised in various forms: political party corruption, media corruption, electoral corruption, legislative corruption, bureaucratic corruption, petro-corruption, trade related corruption, industrial corruption, agricultural corruption, infrastructure corruption, power sector corruption, financial sector corruption, environmental corruption, defense sector corruption, police corruption, judicial corruption, anticorruption corruption, educational corruption, health sector corruption, humanitarian corruption. It is our conviction that Reversing the trend and repositioning the conduct of government business will demand a rebuilding of new Nigeria on the principles of meritocracy, pragmatism and honesty. Also, the practice of nepotism, where individuals are appointed to positions based on their family connections, has also eroded meritocracy in Nigeria, and Tribalism has also played a significant role in undermining meritocracy in Nigeria, as individuals from certain ethnic groups are often given preference over others.

The Emergence of Godfatherism in Nigerian Politics

Godfatherism has become a pervasive phenomenon in Nigeria politics, influencing various aspects of the country's governance, including appointment processes. People now believes that they can get whatever position in the country, even without merit as long they have highly influential person's in the top which they call Godfather. Godfatherism refers to the practice of influential individuals exerting control over political actors and processes, often through patronage, coercion, or manipulation.¹² in the context of appointment processes, godfatherism involves the selection of individuals for public offices based on personal connections, loyalty, or other considerations rather than merit or competence. The emergence of godfatherism in Nigeria politics can be traced back to the country's post-colonial era. During this period, the ruling elite established patrong-client relationships to consolidate power and maintain control.⁹ Over time, these relationships evolved into complex networks of influence and loyalty, which have become a hallmark of Nigerian politics. In explaining God fathering and political patronage in Nigeria, the following speculative paradigm will be considered:

Coalition Principle

This principle focuses on government formation, which simply means on how governing political party or parties enter and construct and consolidate their own government identity.¹⁰ According to this principle, one way to do exactly that is through dispensing patronage politics via state jobs whereby political principals distribute and manage state institutions' jobs in order to bargain over policy output. For this school of thought, political patronage or rather political appointment system is an inherent feature of all governing political parties in government worldwide and there is no problem in dispensing the system at all. However, there are variations between countries on the quality and integrity of bureaucrats appointed based on political patronage rather than merit. It is argued that all governing political parties widely apply this political tool to tame, control and regulate the behaviour of the state agents as they may not be entirely trusted, especially as they deal daily with public monies and other state resources. Even countries castigated as developmental states such as Malaysia, Brazil, China, Japan, South Korea, etc., apply the system at varying degree.¹¹ In similar tone, Du Gay,¹² argues that political principals dispense political patronage via state jobs to tame the power of agency officials and to enhance their (politicians) own positions within government. According to this theory, political patronage via state jobs is not only about controlling but also about ensuring that the state agents achieve the principals' policy objectives particularly given the danger of the opposition political parties' agents to derail and sabotage the governing political party's policy vision and objectives.

Party System Principle

The party system principle also agrees that the conduct of political parties influences the performance of the state institutions including the legislatures since government is constructed by political parties. They can either limit or enhance the powers and operations of the state institutions. According to this theory, certain party systems are able to limit the extent or level of political principals or political parties dispensing political appointment. This theory distinguishes between „fragile party system“ and „competitive party system“. One basic difference is on the level of competitiveness, meaning the likelihood that the incumbent governing political party or parties can be defeated. GrzymanA-Busse,¹³ argues that lack of robust competition between programmatic political parties in the state results into ineffective and inefficient state institutions evident in poor institutional quality or performance thus allowing a governing party or parties to dispense political patronage via state jobs. This in turn leads to corruption and poor governance, which are used widely by the World Bank, Transparency International, etc., as indices for measuring the quality or performance of the state institutions worldwide. In such situation where the state is inefficient due to poor governance systems and or corruption, the governing political party or parties legitimizes itself or themselves based on their ability to reward supporters through selective incentives rather than their ability to generate the kinds of public goods necessary for human and economic development as well as growth.

Meritocratic Principle

This principle literally rejects political patronage via state jobs as enhancing the performance or quality of state institutions. Proponents of this theory¹⁴ argue that political patronage leads to politicization rather than professionalization of state institutions. Politicization of the state institutions eventually culminates into poor institutional capacity and lack of

accountability on public goods provision as the system is immoral and a democratic pathology.

Dahlstrom et al,¹⁵ gives an example of the mayor of Spain between 2001 and 2003 who replaced „merit-recruited“ state agents with political appointees. According to these scholars, the Spanish mayor was able to coordinate his corruption intensions with appointees he had himself selected based on political patronage. Conspicuously, the theory of meritocracy argues that poor performance by state agents appointed on political patronage is often blamed on others or covered up by their political principals. Empirical evidence indicates that officials appointed based on political patronage may be recalled at any time once they have lost favour with their political principals. As noted by Kanyane,¹⁶ with a culture of patronage politics an atmosphere of playing safe is often created, which is not conducive for responsible and accountable bureaucratic institutions. Proponents of this theory strongly maintain that people in the state should be appointed on merit because such officials see office holding as a vocation. For this theory, office holding is not considered a source to be exploited for rents or emoluments nor is considered a usual exchange of services for equivalents.¹⁷ In the study of bureaucracy, Max Weber, for example, advocated for „career personnel“ with specialized training and expertise, among others, as the prerequisite for employment in any bureaucratic institutions. Of course, Weber's work on bureaucracy has a profound impact on our theoretical understanding of how principal-agent relationship within institutions plays out and how the bureaucratic institution developed. Therefore, the theory of meritocracy has intellectual roots from the Max Weber's study of a bureaucracy.

Moreover, Woodrow Wilsons,¹⁸ in his study of administration also argued for an administration apparatus that is devoid of politics and meddling after he was concerned about the bureaucratic system in America that operated as a bastion for political patronage. Proponents of this theory suggest that democratic states all over the world should shun away from political patronage via state jobs and embrace a culture of meritocratic recruitment and promotion. They argue that access to institutions of government as an employee should be conditioned on the bases of possession of relevant knowledge, skills and qualification credentials, what Max Weber,¹⁹ refers to as „expert-officialdom“. This is due to the fact that partly qualified officials in terms of specialized training and examination always enter the state as employees with an understanding that office holding is a vocation. The executive office is separated from the households much as business assets are separated from private fortunes. Proponents of this school of thought give examples of some countries such as Australia, Brazil, Malaysia, China, Japan, UK, etc., that have also introduced a system of tough public civil service examination to select the best potential candidates for the state institutions as agents. The civil service examination system in China, for example, has created a unique class of „scholar-bureaucrats“ irrespective of family or party pedigree even if cadre deployment is applied.²⁰

The emergence of political appointment/patronage has also robbed the citizens of the privilege of enjoying the dividends of democratic governance in the sense that government has become reluctant to initiate and implement policies that would advance the well-being of the generality of the citizens. This was a result of the fact that political patronage in Nigeria was basically predatory in nature. The primary motive of venturing into politics was born out of the need to acquire wealth (money) from the coffers of government to which their „godsons“ held sways.²¹ Therefore, the lean financial resource accruable to the state from the federation account which was meant for the improvement of living

standards of the citizens was paramount interest to them. There are palpable instances where the „godsons“ (governors, chairmen) and so on, refused to settle their godfathers“ as agreed before securing public office, hell was let loose. The experiences recorded in Senator Rashidi Ladoja of Oyo state and Lamidi Adedibu between 2003 and 2007, Olusola Saraki and Mohammed Lawal (2003-2007), and Chris Uba and Chris Ngige (2003-2006), (Asewaju Tinubu and Akinwunmi Ambode 2015-2019) were awful and devastating. The end point and consequences of these godfatherism“ in our politic is that economic activities are brought to a halt, especially education sectors, health, security (political wrangling), agriculture, housing and infrastructural developments etc. The political patrons or godfathers in Nigeria see governance and political power as the cheapest and surest method of amassing wealth to the detriment of the governed. Sponsoring a weak and poor candidate to win election by appointment is seen as a lucrative business whereby the sponsor will invest heavily in imposing his candidate on the people as their leader, with all intent and protégé, called chairmen, and governors.

Political appointment is a dangerous development in Nigeria politics. The electorates are impoverished the more, and the corrupt rich godfathers are corruptly enriching themselves the more. The circle is endless, as the solution to this menace is the serious problem facing Nigeria until a morally sound, committed and patriotic leader emerge to lead the people honestly with the attribute of transparency, openness, people-oriented policies and programmes, Nigeria economic development will be a mirage. The susceptibility of the political structures and institutions to the influence and control of forces operating outside the government but within the political system is a great and potential threat to growth and economic development of the country.

Godfatherism and Political Appointment Processes in Nigeria

Appointment processes in Nigeria have been significantly influenced by godfatherism. The selection of individuals for public offices, including ministerial positions, ambassadorial appointments, and leadership roles in government agencies, is often based on personal connections, loyalty, or other considerations rather than merit or competence. The study by the Nigerian Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies,²² found that 75% of appointments made by the federal government between 2015 and 2017 were based on personal connections rather than merit. Another study by the Centre for Democracy and Development,²³ revealed that godfatherism played a significant role in the appointment of ministers and other public officials in Nigeria.

A formal definition of patronage is "the power of appointing people to governmental or political positions" and "the positions so distributed".²⁴ Generally, the word patronage has a negative connotation that this straight-forward definition fails to convey. Patronage suggests the transgression of real or perceived boundaries of legitimate political influence, the violation of principles of merit and competition in civil service recruitment and promotion. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that governments the world over accept that some political appointments are fully legitimate. A small number of these appointments are justified as a means for political leaders to fashion a circle of government policymakers and managers who share a common agenda. Patronage is clearly a problem, however, when these appointments pervade public administration, severely undermining merit principles. Somewhere between these two extremes the line between appropriate and inappropriate uses of patronage is crossed. Political appointment is the dispensation of favours or rewards such as public office, jobs, contracts, subsidies, prestige or other valued

benefits by a patron (who controls their dispensation) to a client. The patron is usually an elected official or is otherwise empowered to make such grants. In return, the client supplies the patron with some valued service, such as voting for the patron's party or providing money or labour for electoral campaigning. The relationship between patron and client is typically unequal, selective and discretionary; the patron does not generally grant favours to all potential clients but picks and chooses among them.

The Implications of Godfatherism in Appointment Processes: The influence of godfatherism in appointment processes has significant implications for democratic governance and development in Nigeria. These implications include:

- i. **Undermining Meritocracy:** The selection of individuals for public offices based on personal connections rather than merit undermines the principle of meritocracy, leading to incompetence and inefficiency in government.
- ii. **Perpetuating Corruption:** Godfatherism in appointment processes creates opportunities for corruption, as individuals selected for public offices may be beholden to their patrons rather than the public interest.
- iii. **Eroding Public Trust:** The pervasive influence of godfatherism in appointment processes has eroded public trust in government and the political process.

Political appointment/patronage is one of the factors that embedded democratic setting in Nigeria since first republic.²⁵ Regrettably in the face of dilapidation or non-sufficient existence of social infrastructures especially in states and local governments, public resources are used for political patronage. In Nigeria's fourth republic, the emergence of godfatherism posed great threat not only to good governance but also the socio-economic stability of democratic governance.²⁶ Perhaps one of the most disturbing and damaging influence of political patronage in Nigeria's fourth republic was in domain of making nonsense of a truly free, fair and credible electoral process in which the electorates by right are expected to freely elect people of their choice into public office to represent their interests. Indeed, the privilege of electing people of their choice into public office was denied given the situation in which „godfathers“ foisted candidates of their preference on the generality of the people. This is to say the least very inimical to the tenets of democratic rule, when public office holders would not be accountable to the people, who at any rate did not count in their elections into public office. Invariably, the loyalty of such public office holders would be tilted towards their godfathers and this in itself negates one of the critical attributes of democracy which is responsive and transparent government. This scenario is also inimical to good governance and political stability which are predicated on the rule of law, due process, accountability and transparency in the management of public business. The emergence of political patronage has also robbed the citizens of the privilege of enjoying the dividends of democratic governance in the sense that the-would be government became reluctant to initiate and implement policies that would advance the wellbeing of the generality of the citizens. This was as a result of the fact that political patronage in Nigeria was basically predatory in nature.

The primary motive of venturing into politics was borne out of the need to acquire money from the coffers of government to which their godsons held sway. Therefore, the lean financial resource accruable to the state from the federation account which was meant for the improvement of living standard of the citizens was paramount interest to them. In instances where the „godsons“ upon reflection refused to settle their „godfathers“ as agreed upon before securing public office, hell was let loose. The experiences recorded in Enugu

State in 1999 between Jim Nwobodo and Governor Chimaroke Nnamani. Also, in 2007 between Governor Sullivan Chime and Chimaroke Nnamani were awful, shameful and disgraceful. However, political patronage has become a scary phenomenon in Nigerian politics. As observed by Omotola,²⁷ political patronage in Nigeria, particularly in its current form and character, is distributive. Though it is a longstanding and deeply rooted feature of the cultural values of Nigerian society, where it is purely socio-economic in nature and mutually productive for both parties, its politicization would appear to have contributed to the criminalization of politics. Political patrons reign across all spheres of the society: academics, legal, and religion environment. Therefore, the clamour for democracy in Nigeria is to improve both political and socioeconomic situation of the country through massive involvement in the policy making, but reverse is the case as those that attained political power in both legislative and executive arms of government got to the seat of powers through the support of some political „godfathers“ in various states cum the center, however, the desire of political godfathers is to hold political and socio-economic powers both at the center cum the component units as mechanisms to politically influence the activities of political office holders, that is, the Governors and some Legislators in terms of appointing people into various positions, such as Ministers/Commissioners, Chairmen of the boards, Secretaries to the various Institutions, and Treasurers of Local Governments as well as allocation of some developmental projects into various localities within the state or centre as well.²⁸

Indeed, Nigeria has joined the comity of democratic nations with the hope that the ideals of democracy will be upheld and sustained. However, the signals political events in Nigeria are showing are that what we actually have is a democratic system „sustained“ by political patrons. It is not one primarily aimed at improving the welfare of the people. Rather it is system the political class craves for in order to gain access to state resources to finance patronage, patrimonialism and for personal gains.²⁹ This is why violence has to be used to silence the opposition and actualize primitive and exploitative acquisition. Thus, what the present democratic dispensation have brought forth for Nigeria in general is a system sustained by hoodlums for the sake of the political class and not the electorate. To address the problem of godfatherism in appointment processes, several solutions have been proposed including:

- i. **Strengthening Institutional Frameworks:** Robust institutional frameworks, including transparent and merit-based appointment processes, can help to reduce the influence of godfatherism.
- ii. **Promoting Transparency and Accountability:** Greater transparency and accountability in appointment processes can help to prevent the abuse of power and manipulation of the selection process.
- iii. **Encouraging Civic Engagement:** Increased civic engagement, including public participation in appointment processes, can help reduce the influence of godfatherism and promote democratic governance.

Conclusion

For politics in Nigerian to thrive and enjoy stability, a service driven leadership and critical thinking orientation is required as this paper noticed that the problem of Godfatherism is one of the major problems of leadership in Nigerian polity. It recommended that Nigerian leadership must have Philosophers as their rulers as Plato opined in his Republic proposing for good governance when he said, “There will be no end to the troubles of the state or

indeed of humanity until philosophers become kings or until those we now call kings really and truly become philosophers.” This group of leaders must maintain the principles of liberty, equality and due process.

The appointments of state agents based on political Godfatherism instead of meritocracy create problems of poor strategic planning. It also creates institutional instability and loss of institutional memory as evident in increased number of prolonged acting roles as a result of suspensions of more senior state agents by their political principals and high staff turnover. Nigeria has a huge pool of expertly trained and qualified labour force to draw from but political meddling during recruitment and promotion processes pose a threat to building a capable, career-oriented and professional civil service. This must stop, if we want to have a polity that can compete with global practice.

Finally, unless political patronage is stamped out of Nigerian politics, it would be difficult for Nigeria to be stable in politics, democratic governance, and economic development.

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