

Godfatherism: Politics of Endorsement and Democratic Sustainability in Nigeria

Olaoye Olumuyiwa Joseph

Department of Political Science and International Relations Caleb University, Imota, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

The dynamics of godfatherism and its negative consequences on the democratic sustainability of Nigeria has long been a topical issue. This study explores the details of the practice of godfatherism in Nigeria's politics and its effects on democratic sustainability. In this regard, the study's aims were: to examine the causative factors orchestrating godfatherism and its implications in the country among other objectives of the study. The emergence of godfatherism in the Nigerian Fourth Republic poses a great threat to democratic dividends. The study also explores the concept of godfatherism, democracy and good governance. Although descriptive analysis was used to examine godfatherism: politics of endorsement and democratic sustainability. Findings revealed that although godfatherism is an age-long phenomenon in politics even in the advanced societies, but the damage godfatherism has caused to our fragile democracy is causing havoc. If godfatherism is to be encouraged the excesses of godfathers should be checkmated. The study recommends that our country needs a purposeful leadership that has a vision of how it places its citizens at the centre of political project; therefore, the politics of godfatherism should be discouraged and our democratic institution should be encouraged. The research work concludes that for effective functioning of governance in our democracy every must be ready to pay the price for good service in the face of transparency, accountability and intelligible governance system free from bias and prejudice.

Keywords

Godfatherism, Politics, Endorsement, Democratic, and Sustainability



I. Introduction

Like in other African countries, godfatherism has become the central theme of a political setback in Nigeria. The activities of these political fighters have stripped the people of voting for their ideal applicants as their leader and have directly influenced the political structure and the national economy of the nation. The issue is such that the godson oftentimes stands as a stooge of the godfather. The failure of the godson to meet the seeming demands of the godfather is often punished with impeachments or denial of re-election. Godfatherism has become the main problem for many candidates during the election. To contest any political post it has become somewhat necessary to have a strong political godfather. This is because many candidates cannot win an election without the support of the godfather.

Politics of Godfatherism is not a new phenomenon in political movements of Nigeria. However, since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the country witnessed a heightened tempo in the politics of godfatherism that continues to reduce the legitimacy of government and void the electoral value of the citizens. Godfatherism according to Oke (1:36), "has come to assume a dangerous dimension as a consequence of the monetization of politics. Godfatherism is one of the biggest dangers to democracy today and

paradoxically, it only survives with government support and produces an unresponsive leadership”. Ohirole and Ojo (3, p. 11) averred “democracy in Nigeria has not been fully established and the phenomenon of Godfatherism has endangered democratic process and the socio-economic lives of the citizens”. Like any other terminology employed by social scientists, the concept of godfatherism is a term that does not lend itself to easy definition. To fully understand this, some related concepts like godfather and godson need to be defined. Godfather is a kingmaker, boss, mentor and principal.

A godfather is “someone who has built unimaginable respect and followers (voters) in the community and possessed a well-organized political platform and general acceptance from electorate that could secure victory for candidates of his choice” (4:269). The Hausa’s have ‘Maigida’ (master of the house) popularly knows a godfather. The word Maigida goes beyond its literal meaning. Polly, 1966; Abner, 1971 and Pally, 2004 cited in Attah, Audu and Haruna (2014) used the term in their works to refer to those who provided brokerage services to Hausa traders in transit in different parts of West Africa. These traders, at the various transit centres where they have to stop to do business rely on a maigida to facilitate their economic activities. The ‘maigida’ provides them with accommodation, storage and brokerage services. In the Yoruba society, godfather is referred to as ‘Baba Kekere’ (the small great father), ‘Baba Isale’ (the father of the underground world) or ‘Baba Nigbejo’ (a great intercessor in time of trouble). Historical of these terms is ‘Baba Kekere’. It was used to depict community leaders with whom people of less social status identified as a way of providing physical, social, political and economic security for themselves.

Democracy in Nigeria has had a chequered history. From the ‘Wild-Wild West’ experience of the first republic through prolonged autocratic military regimes and the truncated second and third republics to the present democratic dispensation, democracy has suffered debilitating experiences in the country (Msughter, 2019).

After her fourth attempt at democratic system of government, Nigeria is currently at its fifth democratic transition from one democratically elected government to another. The present republic is the longest in all the four witnessed republics in the country. Democracy, constitution making and democratic sustainability are challenges confronting most emerging democratic societies in the world. In Nigeria democratic project had been aborted and abandoned three times through coups by the overbearing military institution (Aondover & Pate, 2021). All these do not happen without the existence of the law that against military taking a leading role in political activities. The irony is always that each time a democratic process is aborted; the legislature is dissolved and constitution suspended and replaced with decree that will empower the military to act contrary to the country’s constitution.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Democracy can be referred to as popular government, or representative government, or participation in government, or republican government, or some overlap between some or all of these. Defining democracy may appear to be easy, but is in fact full of problems. Democracy as the moral and legitimate way through which a society can be administered has spreads to many parts of the world and it has hardly taken root, especially in Africa and particularly in Nigeria (Msughter, 2025).

Politics of godfatherism is not a new phenomenon in the political movements of Nigeria, but since the return to democratic rule, the country has witnessed a heightened tempo in the politics of godfatherism that continues to reduce the legitimacy of

government and void the electoral value of the citizens. Godfatherism is one of the biggest dangers to democracy today and paradoxically, it only survives with government support and produces an unresponsive leadership”. This paper therefore seeks to examine Godfatherism and its effect on democratic sustainability.

a. Research Objective

The objective of this is to investigate:

- 1) The impact of godfatherism on politics of endorsement in an ideal democracy
- 2) The effect of the politics of endorsement on good governance

b. Research Questions

- 1) Is politics of endorsement suitable in an ideal democracy?
- 2) Does politics of endorsement guarantee good governance in a democratic state?

c. Theoretical Framework

In defining the concept of godfatherism in politics as a means of getting endorsement into political office and democratic sustainability, the most important theory is the elite theory.

According to elite theory, it is evident that all the forms of government are essentially oligarchies, who use different values and principles to justify the power struggle and to manipulate the consent of the ruled. Elite theory envisions society as divided between the mass of people and a ruling minority, where the political power – the power to take and impose decisions valid to the whole society which always belongs to the latter. Initially developed by Italian scholars between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the elite theory became crucial in political science after World War II, tackling the substantial question concerning “who governs” even beyond formal or constitutional appearances. The theory posits that a small minority, consisting of members of the economic elite and policy-planning networks, holds the most power and that this power is independent of democratic elections (Dahl, R. A. (1956).

The first period of development of elite theory can be situated between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Even if elitism wasn't a new topic – back in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, there were precursors such as Saint- Simon, Comte, Tocqueville, and Taine who used the concept of elite or managerial class to explain the major historical and political transformations of society – the Italian School of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Roberto Michels, also known as “Machiavellian school,” started this new strand of study, focusing not only on the assumption that every society is characterized by an asymmetric distribution of political power but investigating who holds the power, how, on which basis, for what reasons, with which justification, and how the power can move from a small group to another. Discourses on political elitism raise two important questions: hierarchy and inequality. 'Hierarchy' has to do with the vertical ranking of people in the society into two categories, namely, those at the top and those occupying the lowest positions. Those at the bottom are assumed to be less important than those on top. These social hierarchies are assumed to be pyramidal in nature. There are more people at the bottom of the hierarchy than those on top. The latter are the cream –du –la- sac of the society and are responsible for exercise of social, economic and political powers. Their powers consists largely in their ability to 'articulate ideas, to persuade, to cajole and coerce, to mobilize, to embody and advance symbols top which large numbers of people respond.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 The Concept of Godfatherism

The concept of godfatherism is synonymous to intermediary, mentoring, benevolence, and 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. Gambo (2009) contends that godfathers are men who have the 'power' and influence to decide both who get nominated to contest elections and who wins in the election. In this sense, Godfatherism means office seekers getting connected to an individual who is believed to have the ability to deliver a desired outcome in an electoral contest. It is the tradition for looking for a political father to help promote one's political aspiration.

Bassey and Enetak (2008) conceptualized godfatherism to 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 godsons. The advent of godfatherism in the Nigerian partisan politics dates back to the First Republic when leaders of the three major political parties (Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG) and National Congress of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) carefully and meticulously cultivated godsons that they were convinced would advance the well being of the citizens.

According to Uzoamaka (2010), Ahmadu Bello of NPC, Nnamdi Azikiwe of the NCNC and Obafemi Awolowo of the AG were motivated to do so not to use godsons as surrogates to promote parochial interests, but to promote the developmental aspirations of the people. Unlike the present crop of political godfathers, the first-generation godfathers were essentially benevolent and progressive because they did not abuse their status as godfathers by imposing frivolous demands on their godsons as it is the case today.

Literally godfathers are seen in Nigeria to be men who have the power personally to determine both who get nominated to contest elections and who wins in a state. Those who get employed in the Bureaucracy and those who get robust postings and deployments. There is no gainsaying that godfatherism is firmly established in all the scepter of Nigeria politics and bureaucracy. It has now come to be a guiding principle in contemporary Nigeria.

2.2 Godfatherism and Politics

The word 'godfather' conjures up different meanings to different people. In many parts of Europe and America, it is simply associated with a cuddly uncle. The word has almost the same meaning in the Catholic Church tradition. A young man trying to become baptised or married in the Catholic Church is expected to have a godfather. The Catholic Church's godfather is simply chosen from among the larger congregation and need not be a relative to the godson. The latter counsels the young person on how to live a responsible life. In France, the term 'godfather of industry' is used to depict corporate titans, that is, businessmen with the most clout, and an intriguing class of people who keeps the economy running (Msughter et al., 2021).

Godfatherism manifests itself in the politics of developed countries of the world and Latin American countries in terms of some criminal underworld groups sponsoring politicians during elections in return for the protection of contracts. This kind of situation

is euphemistically referred to as 'party machine' politics in the American political science literature. Our interest in this paper concerns political godfathers. They are slightly different from all the others identified above. Such people are found all over the world. They consist of rich men whose contributions to campaign funds of some candidates have helped the latter to win elections. Even in the developed world, such people invest heavily, most especially in the media, to shore up the image of their candidates while at the same time helping to discredit rival candidates.

Nigeria has all the above types of godfathers: most especially those who serve others, those who expect the society to serve them, and even those who channel their resources into criminal activities. Our interest in this paper is in the godfathers in the political sector. Dr Jibrin Ibrahim defined this category of Nigerians, during an interview granted to the BBC on 10 November, 2003 as 'men who have the power personally to determine who gets nominated and who wins [an election] in a state.

The 'political godfathers' in Nigeria build an array of loyalists around them and use their influence, which is often tied to monetary considerations, to manipulate the rest of the society. Political godfathers use their influence to block the participation of others in Nigerian politics. They are political gatekeepers: they dictate who participates in politics and under what conditions. The role of such people is highly injurious to the advancement of popular, participatory democracy in Nigeria (Isaac O.A (2005).

a. What is democracy?

Democracy' comes from Ancient Greek: demos means 'the people' and kratein means 'to rule'. Hence, demokratia, 'democracy', means 'rule by the people', as defined in, for example, The Concise Oxford Dictionary:

1. A system of government by the whole population, usually through elected representatives.
2. A state so governed.
3. Any organisation governed on democratic principles.

b. A number of features of democracy can be identified:

Democracy as a system of government. Here we can discern two forms of democracy: 'defensive democracy' and 'citizen democracy' 'republican democracy';

- a. democracy and legitimising government;
- b. majority rule and democracy;
- c. equality of citizenship rights;
- d. public opinion in democracies;
- e. the rule of law and democracy.

Democracy is a great 'hurrah' word of modern times. From being associated with mob rule at the beginning of the nineteenth century, democracy had become the objective of every 'civilized' nation by its end. A century later, there is hardly a state or regime, no matter how despotic, that does not proclaim its devotion to 'democracy'. Liberal democracies are among the great creations of the human mind. They establish the conditions for individual freedom and participation in government, for freedom of speech and thought, and, within the rule of law, the stability and order required for that freedom to flourish. In the great struggles and fearful wars of the twentieth century liberal democracy met the challenges from authoritarianism and totalitarianism and ultimately triumphed (Msughter, 2022).

2.3 Godfatherism and Democratic Sustainability

Godfatherism has become a scary phenomenon in Nigerian politics. As rightly observed by Omotola (2007: 139), Godfatherism in Nigeria Democracy particularly in its current system of administration is distributive. It is historically deeply rooted based on cultural values of Nigeria society, where it is purely socio-economic in nature and mutually productive for the beneficiaries. Its politicization would appear to have contributed to the criminalization of politics. For instance, Yoruba have a well-institutionalized and centralized system where the godfather is well known and respected (chiefs and Obas). Godfathers reign across all spheres of the society: academics, legal, and religion environment (Abdullahi & Tunde, 2013).

Therefore, the clamour for true democracy in Nigeria is to improve our political and socioeconomic situation of the country through massive participation in the policy formulation, but reverse is the case as those that attained political corridor in both legislative and executive arms of government however, the desire of political godfathers is to hold political and socioeconomic powers both at the central and the component units as mechanisms to politically influence the activities of political office holders, the Governors and Legislators boards, Secretaries to the various government institutions, Local Governments as well as allocation of some developmental projects into various localities within the State and the centre (Abdullahi & Tunde, 2013).

Meanwhile, the impact of the godfathers on Nigeria's general elections is unprecedented. Godfathers are those who possesses the power to ascertain the security connections, extended local links, enormous financial weight to plot and determine the success of a power seeker at any level of a supposedly competitive politics however, the 2015 general elections reverses the case where the incumbent President i.e. (Former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan lost the election to opposition, Mohammed Buhari who is now the Present President of the Federal republic of Nigeria.

The emergence of godfatherism in Nigeria fourth republic (1999- till date) posed a great threat to democratic dividends and to the socio-economic development and stability of good governance. Perhaps, one of the most disturbing and damaging influence of godfatherism in Nigeria's fourth republic was canvassing for a truly free, fair and credible electoral process in which the electorates by right are expected to freely elect who govern them and represent their interests. Indeed, the privilege of electing people of their choice to govern them was denied given the situations 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 (Chukwuemeka, 2012). When public office 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 would be titled towards their godfathers and this in itself negates one of the critical attributes of governance and democracy which is responsive and transparent government.

2.4 Godfatherism and Good Governance

One of the far-reaching implications of godfatherism on the entrenchment of good governance, which in turn would engender democratic growth and stability, according to Uduji (2009) is the complete erosion of the normative elements of democracy of which trusts is a sine-qua-non attribute between the government and the governed. In a polity where prescribed rules guiding the electoral process are frequently disobeyed with impunity, the basis of citizen's trust in government was compromised.

Governance' is the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented). Governance can be used in several contexts such

as corporate governance, international governance, national governance and local governance (Aondover et al., 2025). In the 1992 report entitled “Governance and Development”, the World Bank set out its definition of Good Governance. It defined Good Governance as “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development”. Good governance has 8 major characteristics. ‘It is participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law.



Figure 1: Principles of Good Governance by United Nations

Participation: People should be able to voice their own opinions through legitimate immediate organizations or representatives. This includes men and women, vulnerable sections of society, backward classes, minorities, etc. Participation also implies freedom of association and expression.

Rule of Law: Legal framework should be enforced impartially, especially on human rights laws. Without rule of law, politics will follow the principle of matsya nyaya ie law of fish which means the strong will prevail over the weak.

Consensus Oriented: Consensus oriented decision-making ensures that even if everyone does not achieve what they want to the fullest, a common minimum can be achieved by everyone which will not be detrimental to anyone. It mediates differing interests to meet the broad consensus on the best interests of a community.

Equity and Inclusiveness: Good governance assures an equitable society. People should have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being.

Effectiveness and Efficiency: Processes and institutions should be able to produce results that meet the needs of their community. Resources of the community should be used effectively for the maximum output.

Accountability: Good governance aims towards betterment of people, and this cannot take place without the government being accountable to the people. Governmental institutions, private sectors, and civil society organizations should be held accountable to the public and institutional stakeholders.

Transparency: Information should be accessible to the public and should be understandable and monitored. It also means free media and access of information to them.

Responsiveness: Institutions and processes should serve all stakeholders in a reasonable period of time.

2.5 Gap to Fill

Findings from past literature reveals that godfatherism is not a new phenomenon in politics. It also reveals that the developed societies practice godfatherism. Unlike our own country where godsons are seen as stooge and return on investment for efforts put into their installation in political offices.

This paper seeks to help reveal the damage godfatherism has caused to our fragile democracy where the godfathers see themselves as “tingods” thus causing havoc to our fragile democracy, Further areas of research on how to ensure that irrespective of the advantages of godfatherism like we have in the advanced societies, it is been checkmated to strengthen our democratic institution.

III. Research Methods

This paper adopts qualitative research design. The researchers used descriptive analysis to examine the issues of godfatherism: politics of endorsement and democratic sustainability in Nigeria. The paper, which is theoretical in nature, draws its argument basically from secondary data which include journal articles, textbooks and internet sources.

IV. Results and Discussion

The significant findings from the research show that godfatherism is an age-long activity even in the world of politics. Also, the overbearing nature of godfathers in recovering their investment on their godsons prevents the society from enjoying the benefits of good governance.

In addition, if godfatherism will be encouraged in our society as a means of helping to discover qualified leaders in the society who lack the financial muscle to get elected into political office, the self imposing nature of the godfathers need to be checkmated.

V. Conclusion

Godfatherism remains a decisive phenomenon in Nigeria’s politics. There remains the need to understand the ultimate power of godfathers, and the factors necessitating its inevitability in Nigerian politics. The modus operandi of contemporary godfathers in Nigeria is not desirable for political and sustainable development in the country. The effective functioning of governance is the prime concern of every citizen of the country. The citizens are ready to pay the price for good services offered by the state, but what is required is a transparent, accountable and intelligible governance system absolutely free from bias and prejudices.

The country needs a purposeful leadership that has a vision of how to place its citizens at the centre of political project without recourse to patron-client relationship and sees acquisition of political power as not an end in itself but a means for serving the collective interest of its people regardless of their ethnic origin. In short, until a morally sound, committed and patriotic leadership emerge to lead the people honestly with the attribute of transparency, openness and people-oriented policies and programmes, Nigeria political and socio-economic development will continue to be a mirage. Politics of godfatherism should be discouraged and our democratic institution should be reinforced to evade from the politics of godfatherism of central government policies and programmes.

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