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Political Conflicts and Godfatherism in Nigeria: A Focus on the Fourth Republic (Pp. 174-186)

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Abstract

The conflict arising from godfatherism has become one of the greatest problems facing the Nigerian political system. The holder of the political position becomes a stooge to his godfather because he that pays the piper dictates the tune. By the time the godson refuses to meet their (godfather's) demand, he is eventually impeached from political office. In Nigeria's fourth republic dispensation (1999 till date), the Saraki-Lawal face off, Nwobodo – Nnamani quagmire, Adedibu –Ladoja crisis, Uba-Ngige saga and all other godfathers protégé crises in Nigeria do not only portray great danger to our democratic experiments, but also on the very essence and validity of our existence as a nation. The billions of naira expended by Nigerian godfathers for bankrolling the elections of their godsons have totally monetized elections in Nigeria which automatically disqualifies men of honour, character and integrity from holding elected public positions. The issue of godfatherism in Nigeria politics is as a result of societal decay, which has encroached into spheres of the Nigerian polity. It is therefore suggested that godfatherism should not be treated as a party affair, but should be offered political, social and legal treatment by the government and the stakeholders in Nigeria.

Introduction

Corruption in the body polity of Nigeria is widespread and is responsible for many of our unpatriotic behaviours. Quite consistency, Nigeria has been considered to be among the first five most corrupt nations of the world.

(Adebanjo, 202:18). It is in this tendency of corruption fuelled by greed rather than patriotism that has resulted in the average Nigerian seeing governance and government as a vehicle for exploitation and self-aggrandizement. While the Nigerian populace craves for a leadership to lift them out of economic and social doldrums, the political elites maintain mercantilism as their watchword and do everything in the hope of monetary gains and kickbacks. Anambra, Oyo, Enugu, Edo States etc are classic examples of this situation.

The second problem easily identifiable as a source of conflict is in the politics of Nigeria is “elitism”. Although this is widely in practice in all parts of the world, but here in Nigeria, it has assumed a disturbing and worrisome dimension. It has become pertinent to have an elite back-up or a strong political godfather before considering running for any elective offices or even political appointment. These godfathers offer the services of their support only in anticipation of financial returns that are alarmingly huge and extravagant as opposed to that of their service to the people.

Under this arrangement, patron –client paternalism has gradually turned itself into an institution and has become an aberration to the practice of democracy in Nigeria. This practice is widespread in all the states in Nigeria but in recent years, it became visible in Anambra and Kwara States. The patron-client relationship has taken various forms in the country, but the most disturbing and offensive types is mainly manifested when elections are about to be held in the country. During this period, the rich patrons hand pick and sponsor candidates who are pliable and amenable to their dubious wishes. Most of the objectives of these patrons are offensive and penurious in nature. They spend huge sums of money to sponsor their clients and even hire thugs for these candidates and ensure that the elections are won by all means. (Heldenheinier, 1970:14).

On the eve of these elections, the clients are made to swear to an oath before a “witch doctor” to ensure that they comply with all agreements that they had entered into with patrons. The patrons make sure that all the money which they have spent were paid in full with interests. If a patron had sponsor a state governor or a president as the case may be, then he has the unlimited right to nominate commissioners or ministers for appointment into the cabinet and to demand for inflated contracts. Infact, patrons are the power behind the throne or they are the power elite. Infact, no major decision of government can be taken unless they are consulted (Ekiyor, 2004:16).

The clients are more or less glorified servants of the patrons. They must comply with every aspect of the agreements that they have entered into with their patrons. Any failure to comply with the provisions of these agreements would result in spiritual and physical sanctions being meted out to the clients by those powerful patrons. Most of these clients suffer in silence without complaining. They are aware of the fact that the patrons would mobilize legislators to impeach them and remove them from office. These clients are also afraid that they could be eliminated through fetish means by the oath they have sworn.

The practice of paternalism is not recognized by the 1999 Constitution in Nigeria. It is also an aberration to the presidential system of government in practice in the country. It has therefore created numerous problems for the nation (Gillner, 1999:71). The patron-client relationship tends to encourage political corruption. Most of the patrons regard sponsorship of their clients as a business venture. In view of the huge investment which the patrons make on their clients during elections, the former tends to regard the election as a do or die affair and the activities of some of the patrons could be described as criminal. They hire thugs during election and some of these thugs carry out violent acts. These have hindered the development of democracy, created some measure of political instability, frustrated and have discouraged some elections from voting during elections.

The Concept of Godfatherism

A Godfather could refer to a person who sponsors or provides care of support for a person or project. In the same token, it could be used to describe a person directing an illegal and criminal organization.

Danoye (2004:44), see godfather as a human being who plays god to his people. He provides their basic needs, feeds for them, protects them and assists them to secure and achieve their objectives. He further states “his support could be seen as investment, which he believes must yield some profits in the future”. This is also peculiar to the godfathers of organized crimes profits in the future”. This is also peculiar to the godfathers powerful blocs that have tremendous influence in the society such as the Kaduna mafia (Bala and Sonni, 1987). It comprises coalition of strong socio-economic and political elites that share similar value system and under an organized structure. In most cases, there are always godfathers who control the affairs of the mafia.

In the words of Akinola (2009: 269) ‘a godfather is a kingmaker, boss, mentor, and principal, while a godson is the beneficiary and recipient of the legacy of a godfather. He further states that “a godfather is someone who has built unimaginable respect...that secures victory for candidates of his choice”. He continued by saying that the politics of godfatherism involves the anointing of a godson who is expected to win an election by using the influence, wealth, political structure and political experience of godfather.

Godfathers are powerful individuals who determine who, what, when and how things operate and are usually in the corridors of power. Many godfathers in the present day Nigeria operate like the mafia by displaying similar violent scheming and aggressive ‘politicking’ coupled with manipulating devices of having their way by any means. They rely on Machiavelli’s slogan, “the ends justify the means”.

Following from the above, it is glaring that godfathers’ role is sponsoring and bankrolling of bills. This is what gives them the power over their godsons and the penchant to wrench their powers at all cost if their will is not obeyed.

Chimaroke Nnamani, the former governor of Enugu State stated that, the position of godfather in any system is like a virus, often out to create ill-will, but especially to subjugate the godson whom he planted and would want to do his will at all cost. The godson is placed in subservient position through his godfather. According to him, “...the godfather is a merchant set out to acquire the godson as a client”. The godfather is simply a self seeking individual out there to use the government for his own purposes (Chimaroke, 2004:17).

Osuntokun (2003:42), the political relationship under successive governments in Nigeria is a reflection of the international economic order, which facilitates the pursuit or regime change by avaricious godfather whose major pre-occupation is to perpetuate their hegemonic political influence for personal interest and aggrandizement.

If the aforementioned statement is properly x-rayed, one would agree with the statement that the reward of godfatherism seems to be more personalized. The godfathers take politics as an occupation they rely solely on it for survival. They subject their godchildren to their hegemonic political influence. They rig elections massively to install their clients into offices. Virtually, they do this because of their interest in the state resources and assurance of kick-backs. In the words of Thovethin (204:69)..”those that

cannot muster the billions of naira enter into “nocturnal agreement with political Lords who also want to control state power, but lack necessary credibility for contesting and winning election or those that see politics as the most money spinning investment”. Therefore, those who have political ideas and do not have access to godfathers are not given the opportunity to use their ideas for the benefit of the state.

The illegal use of money in politics belongs to the realm of the godfather. Godfatherism has become a factor in Nigerian politics such that very few politicians can achieve success without the stalwart support of godfathers. In Nigeria, the desire of individuals to rule at all cost has sold political leadership to the highest bidders, as whopping sums of money are needed for electoral manipulation. Therefore, desperate politicians who wish to win elections usually seek after godfathers. The implication of this in Nigerian politics is that the country is yet to make appreciable progress in transparent governance because godfathers usually create setback, which hinders democratic growth and development in Nigeria.

Apart from being antithetical to democratic consolidation in Nigeria, godfatherism is an evil building block for corruption, retrogression, underdevelopment, mediocrity and backwardness. This view is quite revealing as it unveils the problematic dimensions the phenomenon of godfatherism has assumed in Nigeria especially during this fourth republic. Tracing the history of Nigerians since political independence, it shows that aspirants to political offices who are less financially empowered rely greatly on the financial muscle of the moneybags in the society who invariably become their mentors and political godfathers. The moneybags on the other hand may look for a popular and very outstanding character to invest their money on by encouraging him to contest for an elective office, which will be manipulated in his favour. In order to realize the mission, the political godfathers capitalize on the vulnerability of poverty ridden electorates who can be lured with money, food and material things to sell their votes to the highest bidder. On this, Nnamani again has this to say:

Poverty makes it possible for the emergence of godfathers, the prevalence of this makes it easy for godfathers to rise and pervade the environment of the not well structured polities. In addition, the election is manipulated through financial inducement of electoral officers, thuggery or outright rigging of votes. The activities of political godfathers in Nigeria’s

fourth republic are even more challenging and daring to democracy and democratic stability. (Nnamani 2004:28)

From the foregoing, it is obvious that godfatherism involves, two parties, (godfather and godson), whose relationship is symbiotic in nature. Both parties need each other to survive and achieve their aim. The godfather bankrolls the campaign of the godson while the godson reciprocates by paying huge interest and awarding contracts to the godfather.

Erhabe's rhetorical question, "if money is therefore accepted as a *sine qua non* for democratic politics, what could be wrong with it". "Is a tacit illusion to godfatherism" (Erhabe, 2003: 214). In democracy, there is usually the need to spend certain amounts of money to plan and execute party strategies in order to capture the machinery of government, such money can rarely be provided by a single individual except through collective efforts of members who may willingly donate money to the party or sponsor candidates at election. This practice unavoidably attracts a number of affluent individuals who make huge donations and consequently become very influential in the party. Ukhun (2004; 86) affirmed that "godfatherism and money politics could vitiate an electoral process and negate genuine democracy". He said that "godfathers could use their money to the detriment of Nigeria's democratic experiment". The creation of two-party system by the administration of President Babangida was prompted by the roles of godfatherism in money politics. This was done to annihilate other interest groups in order to ensure political equality, free participation and free political contest in line with its philosophy of 'equal founder, co-founder, equal joiner and co-joiner" (Nwachukwu, 2003, 18).

The general masses who are eager to reap the so-called dividends of democracy are the ones to bear the brunt of this unholy relationship. The consequence of which often manifest itself in several forms including; incompetent leadership, unnecessary interference and sometimes control of governmental affairs by external forces, political instability arising from crisis of legitimacy, outright siphoning of public funds meant for both development purposes and advancement of people's living standard. On this Coker (2004) said that "godfathers of Nigeria politics have always used their positions, power and influence for their personal aggrandizement to the detriment of the poor masses".

Irrespective of the definitions and explanation given by various scholars, and authors are used in this paper, one thing is clear, that is the concept of

godfatherism is firmly establishing itself as a scourge in contemporary Nigerian politics. The godfatherism phenomenon is an aberration to the practice of true democracy in Nigeria.

Conflicts in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

Without doubt godfatherism related crisis has assumed a bizarre position from the enthronement of civil rule in Nigeria in 1999. It started with the acrimony that existed between Dr. Olusola Saraki (godfather) and Alhaji Muhammed Lawal (Protégé), the governor of Kwara state between May 1999 and September, 2003. Dr. Saraki was purported to have endorsed other contenders as governor of the state and also bankrolled his campaign expenses. But Lawal refused to reciprocate this gesture of Dr. Saraki when he did not give him adequate government patronage and by acting in ways contrary to what was expected as a loyal "godson". Saraki who appears to have a firm control of Kwara state politics swore that a second term for Lawal would no longer be a matter of course.

"I am keeping the second term with me, Lawal's conduct will determine whether he will get it or not" When Saraki could no longer trust Lawal with the state governorship, he threw his son into the fray in the ticket for the governorship election in 2003. The orgy of destruction, violence and death recorded in the state is a veritable tribute to the godfather /godson syndrome. The result of the election at the April 2003 polls confirmed Saraki's rating as the kingmaker of Kwara state. (Omoruyi, 2006:14).

During the second term of President Olusegun Obasanjo, the phenomenon of godfatherism became more alarming and dangerous to the survival of Nigeria's fledgling democracy. In Oyo state, Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu (godfather / and Ladoja (protégé) battled for the soul of Oyo state. This affected governance in the state and it re-enacted political violence for which the state was famous for. At the instance of Lamidi, Ladoja won the gubernatorial state election defeating the incumbent governor Alhaji Lam Adesina. The decision of Adedibu to nominate 80 percent of the new commissioners and special advisers signalled the beginning of the end of the pact between Adedibu and Ladoja. The animosity between them was put into display during the electioneering campaign for the March 2004 local government elections. Ladoja was left to his devices until he was consumed through impeachment by the tiger he mounted in 2003 (Okafor, 2003: 14).

What about the Story of Chris Uba (godfather) and Chris Ngige (Protégé) of Anambra State? After the oath-taking at the Okija Shrine, the godson refused to play to the rule of the game as arranged. This was followed by looting, blood shedding, gubernatorial abduction and judicial ambushes etc. The end result was the removal from office of the godson (Ngige) by the Court on 16th March, 2006. (Obey, 2004:28). The tussle between Government Ngige and Chris Uba cost the state heavy destruction of government properties. It shows the devilish and manipulative tendency of godfatherism. It also exhibited to a large extent that one who does not have money or who is not fronted by one of the huge financial muscle cannot contest and win an election in Nigeria. In this case, the godfather bought up the political offices from the powers that be before the election. It was a known fact that the godfather bought twenty two out of the twenty four seats in the Anambra State House of Assembly. Three Senators who neither campaign, printed posters nor contested the elections were duly returned as elected. The nation was also shocked to hear of post-dated resignation letters from an elected governor (Ojo, 2006, 13-19). In spite of the fact that Governor Ngige did more than previous governors in terms of road construction and other infrastructural development and payment of salaries to workers, godfatherism syndrome slowed down progress in the State.

The political tussle in Anambra State actually started in 1999 with governor Mbadiniju and his godfather, Chief Emeka Offor. What appeared to be a minor disagreement between the governor and his sponsor later turned out to be a major face-off which threatened the soul of the State. The crisis eventually hamstrung the governor and in the process, he incurred the wrath of other segments of the State. The situation was worsened by his inability to pay State workers salaries regularly and public schools remained closed for up to one academic session. This led to a strike action by workers. As a result, the Anambra State Chapter of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) became critical of the governor and gave him an ultimatum to pay salary arrears or resign forthwith. In the process of the agitation, the Chairman of the State Branch of the NBA was assassinated along with his wife. Lawlessness, violence and orgies of extra-judicial killings became the culture in the State. Social and basic amenities could not be provided for the people of Anambra State since the governor concentrated on his political godfather because, he who pays the pipe dictates the tone". Governor Mbadiniju used the Anambra State Vigilante Services, the "Bakassi Boys" to intimidate political opponents in his bid to secure a second term in office (Ayinde,

2001; 22). In spite of this Ofori vowed to ensure that Mbadiniju did not get a second term. The political landscape was dictated by the political godfather in the State.

In 1999, Chief Jim Nwobodo brought a relatively unknown Dr. Chimaroke Nnamani, a medical doctor who had sojourned in the United States to contest the governorship seat in Enugu State. It was believed that Dr. Nnamani had no money of his own to pay for his electioneering expenses nor had he any structure at either ward, local or state levels. He rode on the fame and money of Chief Nwobodo to power and kicked away the ladder. As governor, he made his own money, built his own structures and activated his own army of loyalists (Eze, 2006, 14). For Nnamani, it was a case of a winner takes all politics. For Nwobodo the godfather, on the other hand, he was bent on teaching Nnamani, the problematic protégé, a lesson in political science and obedience. The mayhem and deaths that visited Enugu State during the titanic tussle for pre-eminence prior to the second term bid of Nnamani in 2003 is fit for the terminator movie series (Ossai, 2006:12).

Senator Ali Modu Sheriff is one of the few political godfathers who dared to contest for an elective position. While he was running for one of the Senatorial positions in his state, Borno, he also facilitated the selection and election of the governor and many state legislators. Alhaji Mala Kachalla became the ANPP governor of Borno State in 1999 courtesy of the political structure and financial muscle of Ali Modu Sheriff. When Sheriff fell out with his favourite godson, he made sure that Kachalla was denied the ANPP ticket for his second term bid. (Isa, 2006:13). The most graphic illustration of the friction between Kachalla and his “boss” was the frequent executive and legislative face-off in the state as well as the instigation of the party leadership in the State against Kachalla by Sheriff. The House of Assembly and the party leadership have largely been hostile to the governor. Sheriff's game plan was to make Kachalla irrelevant in the scheme of things and ensure that he fails to pick the party's ticket in 2003. Alhaji Sheriff decided to test the gubernatorial turf himself in 2003 while Kachalla in frustration moved over to the Alliance for Democracy (AD) to actualize his dreams. Kachalla lost to his former godfather (Mohammad 2005:17).

There is no gain saying the fact that the election of Chief Lucky Igbinedion as Edo State Governor in 1999 was primarily the handiwork of Chief Tony Anenih, aided by Dr. S. O. Ogbemudia and the governor's father, Chief Gabriel Osawaru Igbinedion. The three musketeers played a consortium of

godfathers between 1999 and 2003. However, between 2003 and 2009, during the second tenure of Lucky Igbinedion, it atomized into two unequal factions with Chief Anenih and Dr. Ogbemudia pairing up and Chief Igbinedion aligning (naturally) with his son Lucky. The battle line was drawn and new alliance and alliances were made. The entire polity of Edo State was polarized. There emerged multilateral state secretariats and duplications of party officials at wards, local government and state levels. This was followed by threat, and complaints of assassinations, arson, suspensions and expulsions, acts of brigandage, institutions of private armies etc. All these have replaced the primary aim of government and followership. This sorry state of Edo State was indicative of the diversion of scarce resources, ideas and materials to non-productive ventures designed to oil the stand-off that the estranged godfathers and godson have visited on the innocent people of Edo state (Osaze, 2005, 17). It is a well known fact that no meaningful development can be achieved in an atmosphere of wars of attrition, crisis and people who are perpetually and diametrically opposed to one another.

Godfatherism in Nigerian Politics: Concluding Comments

Democracy in Nigeria has assumed the form pre-bendalism. Within this context, state power is treated as a congress of office, which can be competed for, appropriated and then administered for the benefit of individual occupants and their support group. The official public purpose of the office then became a secondary concern (Joseph, 2003).

However, political godfatherism as presently constituted is a relationship existing between a godfather and the protégé, which is wholly in monetary terms. "I bankroll your electioneering campaign and you pay me back some expected sum of money with other expected government patronage, while in an elected office". That is a witty necrotic manifestation of the deadly deeds of a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the superstructures of our society; political, legal, cultural and social. The phenomenon has assumed this bizarre form since the enthronement of civil rule in Nigeria on May 29, 1999 heralding the period of the fourth republic.

Godfatherism is not new in Nigerian politics. It has only assumed a new form under the nascent fourth republic democracy, partly because the Nigerian economy is still at the primitive stage of capital accumulation by the renters and commissioned agents with little or no productive capacities. Politics therefore is the only means of reaching out at the state resources. This phenomenon has trampled on the basic principle of democracy and has

encouraged the failure of necessary structures and institutions to act decisively at correcting the anomalies. Godfatherism in Nigeria is therefore a manifestation of a societal decay. It has become a pestilence to the practice of a true democracy in Nigeria.

There is a high tendency for the emergence of godfatherism politics in an elitist democracy such as Nigeria where the society is hierarchically patterned. Powerful political elites stand at the top and wield power and they determine the power structures below them. This makes politics riotous, difficult to manage with anarchic pattern of political operation and flagrant abuse of power by all the parties involved.

Godfathers who take charge of the affairs of political parties eventually constitute the monopolists that determine the outcome of governance. Thus they accomplish that goal by taking (financial) control of the state through their godsons. In all this corruptive tendencies accentuated by patronage politics (Godfatherism) has weakened political institutions and have served as impediments to social and economic growth in Nigeria. So the eradication of this practice from Nigeria's political system is imperative for the survival of its democracy.

In this paper, it has been shown that the fourth republic in Nigeria has witnessed some political conflicts due to the problems of godfatherism in the country's body polity. The political actors – the godfathers as well as their godsons were always on the verge of contending “who is who” in their states. The failure of democracy in Nigeria can be attributed largely to the rising trend of godfatherism.

Godfatherism is evil to society as it brings about political instability. Godfatherism also suffers from the “inability thesis” in Nigerian politics where godsons see themselves as unable to win elections and for this reason subjugate themselves to godfathers to help them win elections. Godfatherism constitutes an impediment and a scourge to genuine democracy in Nigeria. It is antithetical to the liberty and welfare of the citizens. The issue of godfatherism should therefore not be treated as a party affair, but should be offered political, social and legal treatment by the government and stakeholders in Nigeria.

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