

PERVERSE BROKERAGE: GODFATHERS AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The concept of godfatherism is firmly establishing itself as a guiding principle in contemporary Nigerian politics. The question is whether such guiding principle is a positive one, encouraging of democratic consolidation, stability and development most earnestly desired by a nation starved of hope. The activities of Godfathers, their use of violence to achieve control of government machinery make clear that the contrary is the case, that the godfather is the boss of an organised political crime outfit against the Nigerian people. This paper argues that the current prominent role of the godfathers is due to the middleman role they play for politicians seeking political power and legitimacy in the face of an apathetic citizenry. It argues that the consequences of such brokerage activity by the godfather is a perverse one as their very existence and success has demanded terms of exchange that lean heavily in their favor and in which their control over economic and coercive resources facilitates the preservation and manipulation of the scarcities and insecurities experienced by the local populace.

INTRODUCTION

“One thing in politics is that you must believe in godfatherism. If I did not believe in it, I would not be in daddy’s place,”

--Reverend Jolly Nyame, the Governor of Taraba State northern Nigeria.

“Whether you like it or not, as a godfather you will not be a governor, you will not be a president, but you can make a governor, you can make a president.”

“I am the greatest godfather in Nigeria because this is the first time an individual single handedly put in position every politician in the state.”

-- cited in Jubrin Ibrahim.

The above quotes amply support the claim by Jibrin Ibrahim that “The concept of godfatherism is firmly establishing itself as a guiding principle in contemporary Nigerian politics” The

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question is whether such guiding principle is a positive one, encouraging of democratic consolidation stability and development most earnestly desired by a nation starved of hope.

The activities of Godfathers such as Arthur Eze (Anambra), Emeka Offor (Anambra), Chris Uba (Anambra)² and Lamidi Adedibu (Oyo) in the last ten years in form of abduction attempts on the political office holders, impeachments of governors, deputy governors and leaders of state and local government legislatures, use of violence to achieve control of government machinery, make clear that the contrary is the case.

The term godfather in Nigerian politics has thus come to connote “the boss of an organised political crime outfit against the Nigerian people”³. “It is a term now reserved for God forsaken criminals who will go to any length; I mean any length to achieve their set goals of wielding political power including arson, intimidation, warning, flogging and sometimes assassination”.

The violence unleashed and resulting stress placed on capacity of federal system to manage conflict, ensure societal stability and rebuild citizens confidence in capacity of governmental

institutions to meet developmental needs necessitates the need for a serious analysis of the phenomenon of godfather in Nigerian politics.

Who is the Godfather? What factors, political, economic and social account for their emergence and sustenance? What roles do they play? Whose needs do they service and how? What is their *modus operandi*? What impact does their activities have on governmental capacity to meet developmental and security needs of its citizens? These questions are fundamental to gaining an adequate knowledge of a phenomenon that has taken Nigerian state and society by storm in the last ten years.

To understand the problematic of godfather, this paper adopts an approach that emphasises a historical analysis of the production and distribution of power and wealth within the African state in order to expose the motives and responsibilities of the actors involved. The paper adopts a framework that pays close attention to the opportunities and constraints, for the accumulation and monopolisation of local economic and political power, which are provided by the micro-and macro structures of the Nigerian state.

The paper starts off with an attempt to understand the godfather as a service

provider and analyses the *modus operandi* of such service provision. Part two focuses on understanding the evolution of Godfatherism in Nigerian politics from the inception of self-rule in early 1950s to present. Part three assesses the impact of Godfatherism on state capacity to achieve development and democratic consolidation. It argues that there is a strong dissonance between the accumulative needs of the godfather and state aspirations for development as both struggle for access to and control of same source of resources. Part four, the conclusion argues that godfathers hamper rather than promote democratic governance with their current prominence due to the opportunities and constraints for accumulation and monopolisation of economic and political power provided by the micro and macro-structures of the state.

I.

POWER, CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

At the heart of the phenomenon of the godfather in Nigerian politics is an understanding of the intricacies of political power acquisition and control by politicians. The major objective of the politician is the acquisition of political power, political power defined as “the ability to systematically influence state decision-making processes”.

Political power thus involves as expressed by Lacam⁴⁴ “the conquest of and conservation of one or several . . . centers of decision-making”. In conquering and conserving control of centers of decision-making, the politician is confronted with a number of constraints in the form of regulatory rules (electoral laws/political finance laws)⁵ or contextual (cost of financing electoral campaigns⁶, all of which can hinder quest for and conservation of political power.

Politics thus is a matter of risk management with the successful politician been one who successfully overcomes, personally or through the assistance of external agent(s) the constraints that threaten to hamper his political career. It is as an agent or risk manager that the godfather achieves his prominence. The godfather is a power broker. His prominence is a function of his ability to help the politician overcome constraints to the acquisition of political power.

He overcomes constraints to clients acquisition and sustenance of political power through his ability to engage in resource conversion, that is engage in an exchange that allows for the transformation, the conversion of resources of a certain nature (money, information, distribution of food, threat

of force, jobs, friendship, social status legal sanctions, votes, ethnic, religious) into resources of another nature (economic political) with the aim of reducing constraints to political power acquisition.

The godfather is able to engage in resource conversion or transformation because he is an astute political entrepreneur who combines a bird-eye view of the political systems and its workings with ability to accumulate, restructure and deploy effectively political resources⁷ such as money, information, distribution of food, threat of force, jobs, friendship, social status legal sanctions, votes, to overcome constraints, contextual or otherwise to a politician's successful acquisition and conservation of political power. In other words, he knows what appropriate resource to apply at the appropriate time to overcome a specific problem. He knows how to convert a particular form of resource into another form that will adequately resolve the problems facing a client⁸.

It is his skill in the art of resource conversion that the godfather places at the disposal of the politician as means for overcoming the constraints to acquisition of political power. The skill provides the politician with a flexible

but extremely efficient and ruthless mechanism to successfully overcome constraints to acquisition of political power. In return the political godfather demands privileged access to state resources. The godfather utilises his access to the state to accumulate economic resources, usually through corrupt practices, a part of which is invested in economic enterprises and a part converted, through distribution to his clients, into symbolic capital in the form of political support which legitimises his access to the state and its resources.

It is thus by combining at least three registers of power, administrative/bureaucratic, political and business that the godfather is able to create a system of personal rule that places him above all other parties in society. The mechanics of godfather risk-aversion activities and the benefits it brings him become very clear through an examination of itinerary of Godfatherism in Nigeria since early 1950s.

II.

ITINERARY OF GODFATHERISM IN NIGERIA

Civilian regimes in Nigeria have always been confronted with an institutional context of politics that demanded high mobilisation of voters as key to gaining

control of political power. As political parties in Nigeria were not the disciplined, ideological parties that existed in the West they faced a dilemma as to how to achieve the necessary condition for acquiring political power. As solution, most political parties deploy Machine Politics, a strategy that achieves political mobilisation of electorate through the deployment of patronage⁹ Government employment patronage, the distribution of contracts, licenses and individual loans, the use of pork-barrel grants and public works in localities, the centralised collection of kick-backs from large firms with government contracts and the creation of new state corporations for patronage purposes.

Central to success of distribution of patronage as means of mobilisation of electoral support is the capacity to enforce compliance¹⁰. It was not enough for resources to be distributed, parties had to ensure that those who received such resources delivered the desired electoral support. It is in meeting the enforcement needs of political parties that godfathers became central to the success of politics in the first and second republics. Godfathers deliver parliamentary seats or clusters of seats to their clients on election day

through a combination of vote buying, coercion and electoral fraud (resource conversion)

In return, political parties co-opt godfathers into their ranks by giving them positions in government and its very many corporations (patronage). Through such positions godfathers are able to simultaneously satisfy the accumulation needs of themselves and their supporters (prebendalism) and in return provide sure electoral support during elections¹¹.

The success of godfathers in helping political parties overcome constraints of resource conversion that confronted patronage politics, the constraint of enforcement, placed godfathers in a strong position to help military boys resolve the major dilemma that faced their control of political power after 1966, the dilemma of legitimacy. The military on seizing power have always to resolve the legitimacy dilemma. Some military regimes created one-party states that could organise elections and lay claim to popular mandates. Others like the Nigerian case, co-opted godfathers into their governments and by so doing ensure political mobilisation of citizens and the legitimacy such mobilisation confers.

For example, in northern Nigeria, the governor appointed by General Ironsi, Hassan Usman Katsina had to lobby actively the godfathers in northern Nigeria especially those associated with the late Saudana in order to have peace in the north as he along with everyone associated with the Ironsi regime were seen as traitors to the northern cause¹². In the West, the military coup re-established the dominance of the godfathers associated with Egbe Omo Oduduwa and Action group as the military governor Adekunle Fajuyi had to rely on them to establish law and order and calm after the “Wild Wild West riots” of 1965. The subsequent government of Adeyinka Adebayo continued to rely on Egbe’s network to govern the west especially in the run-up to and during the civil war¹³.

In return for such co-operation, the military permitted godfathers continued access to state resources and to continue with the accumulation and restructuring of political resources necessary for maintaining their political networks while ensuring if not support but at least the quiescence of the political society vis-à-vis the military¹⁴.

The result of indispensable services provided to civilian and military politicians are powerful godfathers who sit a-top vast patronage networks at the local, state and federal level that presently dominate the political landscape in Nigeria. Political outcomes are primarily a function of titanic battles among these magnates who bargain among themselves and-at the expense of the impoverished greater public-within a political context of multiple Ethnoreligious divisions. They have transformed the Nigerian federation into vast pyramid- structured patronage network that is blatantly neo-patrimonial and anti-developmental¹⁵.

III.

IMPACT OF GODFATHERISM ON THE NIGERIAN STATE AND SOCIETY

As pointed out earlier, the godfather demands as reward for his services a privileged access to state resources which enables him to accumulate economic resources, usually through corrupt practices, a part of which is invested in economic enterprises and a part converted, through distribution to his clients, into symbolic capital in the form of political support which

legitimises his access to the state and its resources.

What is worth noting here is that the accumulation process of the godfather is anti-development from the point of view of the majority of the citizens as his accumulation is based on a diversion of resources meant for meeting the developmental needs of the citizens. In other words, the godfather works for himself, his relationship with his clients been more predatory than paternalistic, more coercive than clientelist.

As pointed out by Sidel, overall:

“These ‘local strongmen’ work to achieve positions of local monopoly, in which the terms of exchange between ‘patron’ and ‘client’ lean heavily in their favor, and in which control over economic and coercive resources facilitates the preservation and manipulation of the scarcities and insecurities experienced by the local populace”¹⁶.

Thus, a major source of Nigeria’s underdevelopment can be traced to the doorsteps of the godfathers.

Talking of underdevelopment, godfathers, through the resource conversion skills they place at disposal of politicians, have been active

participants in the installation of and sustenance of rapacious governments, civilian and military since independence in 1960. They have enabled such regimes to avoid the constraints of accountability, especially vertical accountability, which presupposes government accountability to its citizens.

Similarly, horizontal accountability, which presupposes the maintenance of the rule of law by government agencies, is negated because godfathers through their straddling (combining of multiple political positions) and prebendal activities encourage “encroachment ¹⁷” and “corruption”¹⁸, the two principal ways by which horizontal democratic accountability is violated.

While sustaining state rapaciousness, the relationship of the godfather to the state is predatory as the logic of godfather accumulation and success demands that the state be weak and remains dependent on the services of the godfather. Simply put, the position of the godfather is a delicate one, his economic accumulation and hence political power is closely tied to the nature of the state. In a situation where a strong state emerges, especially one that is concerned with satisfying the

developmental needs of its citizens, the godfather faces the threat of extinction.

It follows *ipso facto* that godfathers will do all they can to prevent the emergence of a strong state, as its activities would entail a diversion of resources meant for godfather private accumulation to other purposes, which from the godfather point of view was “anti-developmental” and wasteful. This scenario helps to make sense of politics of Nigeria’s fourth republic.

The fourth republic was a “pacted affair”¹⁹ involving some arrangement for power transfer negotiated by cartels of elite group interest, be they ethnic, social class-based or both. In other words the fourth republic resulted from series of negotiations involving various godfather-led political networks with military godfathers both within and without government playing a major role²⁰.

Power was handed over to a person whom the godfathers believed would not rock the boat, meaning would not deny them continued access to state resources for continued accumulation and restructuring of political resources for personal use especially for the maintenance of control over political society.

The present problems within Nigerian state, especially the crisis over third term of President Obasanjo can be traced to disenchantment of some godfathers with the failure of the pact to produce the desired result. The failure of the pact is ascribed to a tendency or move by the candidate of the godfathers, Obasanjo, to transform himself into a godfather, the dominant one at the expense of other godfathers. The conclusion is based on an analysis of the various policies instituted by Obasanjo since he assumed office²¹, which have had transformatory effects on the activities and power bases established by godfathers in all the regions of the federation.

His policies have denied certain godfathers access to state resources and hence weakened their hold on clients and local political institutions just as such control was been hijacked by new actors seen as sympathetic to Obasanjo. The third term agenda came to be seen by disgruntled godfathers as the culmination of Obasanjo’s ambition to become the “godfather of all godfathers” with its success sounding the death kneel of their ambitions as key actors in Nigerian politics.

The various conflicts and violence that have characterised the six years of the

fourth republic can be seen as reactions to the policies of the Obasanjo régime aimed at installing a strong state able to dictate the pace of political life which had long since been left to the dictates of the godfathers, even if it was to take the form of replacing the present regionally based and semi-autonomous networks of godfathers with one network of godfathers centrally controlled by Obasanjo.

CONCLUSION

The presence and prominence of godfathers on Nigerian political scene is a function of needs of politicians to overcome constraints to acquisition of political power. They help to overcome such constraints through resource conversion skills, which they place at disposal of political client. In return they gain privileged access to state resources. The reality on ground in Nigeria shows that godfathers are not benign forces in Nigerian politics as their very existence and success has demanded terms of exchange that lean

heavily in their favor and in which their control over economic and coercive resources facilitates the preservation and manipulation of 'the scarcities and insecurities experienced by the local populace'.

Godfathers have been active participants in the installation of and sustenance of rapacious governments, civilian and military in Nigeria since independence in 1960 as they assist them in subverting the constraints of democratic accountability while ensuring the continued underdevelopment of the state. Godfathers thus constitute the major obstacle to entrenchment of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The latter would entrench a climate of accountability and bolster efforts at creating an amicable state-society relations which would render unnecessary the resource conversion skill of godfathers and bridge the gulf between the state and society in Nigeria.

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