

## Full Length Research Paper

# Godfatherism and the future of Nigerian democracy

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**The study explores the relationship between godfathers and godsons with a particular attention to its influence on the development of Nigeria's politics, and seeming demise of resourceful governance in the country. The study adopts unstructured interview to elicit the perception of actors' involved and political elites, relying on qualitative and content analyses of data. The study found that there was a shift in the modus operandi of post independence godfatherism, and what obtains in contemporary Nigeria was violence-inspired godfatherism, which successfully replaced politics of welfare by politics of warfare in the affected areas. This acted as impediments to sustainable democratization process in Nigeria. The study concludes by recognizing the inevitability of godfathers in politics but there was the need for proper management of godfather/godson relationship.**

**Key words:** Godfatherism, patron-client politics, mafianism.

## INTRODUCTION

The word Godfather brings back memories of a popular movie, *The Last Don*, which was based on a novel written by Mario Puzo. The film reveals the display of naked power in a highly competitive criminal world, which best illustrate the manifestation of godfatherism in the contemporary Nigerian politics.

The recent activities of some Nigerian godfathers could be likened to attributes of mafianism; however, some still see the existence of godfathers as the balancer of power in a democracy. Ezenekwe, (n.d) believes in the need to have a good-hearted individual (people's hero) at the sole realm of absolute power, a godfather to distribute power as he deems, and anoints who rules. But, godfatherism has taken a strange dimension in Nigeria's political environment. It has become a menace pulling down the foundations of masses-driven governance, thereby denying Nigerians the much-deserved dividends of democracy. It becomes instructive to point out that Patron-Client politics does not have a universal meaning in world politics. In most Asian nation that is Japan, and even Jamaica, it refers to the relationship between the vote seekers (Patron) and voters (Client), (Nakene, 1970; Buddan, 2006). Godfatherism, otherwise called neopatrimonialism (Sklar, 2006:107), manifests in Nigeria as Patron-Client politics. The practice involves a strong bond between the patron and the client, a bond of loyalty, compliance and mutual understanding. It relies on calculated political and business decisions, and even affection (Hyung-Gon, 2007: 26). However, obligation (a 'gift' or social duties), which

might not be written, is a common knowledge.

Godfatherism became popular in Nigerian political space in the 1960's, and early post-independence leaders became godfathers (Mamah, 2007). The handiwork of godfathers was visible at the return to civil rule in 1979, but military regimes that characterized the 1980's obstructed its activities. The 1999 civil rule ushered in another form of godfatherism, which reached its climax during the wanton destruction of lives and properties that witnessed the violent confrontation between a godfather (Chris Uba) and governor of Anambra state (Chris Ngige). This singular act brings to the fore a new dimension to the practice of godfatherism in Nigeria. This was in contrast to the roles played by godfathers in Nigeria's democratic practice between 1958 and 1983.

Some of the builders of Nigerian federalism, Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikwe and Ahmadu Bello, who became godfathers after independence, were lionized, respected, idolized and worshipped (Fawole, 2001). Although people tried to exaggerate their achievements, and their persons were made to look more than ordinary. But their brand of godfatherism added value and experience to governance.

It is imperative to unravel the mystery behind the power of godfathers, its manipulating strategies, evolution, modus operandi, and factors necessitating the triumph and consolidation of godfatherism in Nigeria. The study gives an appraisal of the godfather-godson's relationship, which has its overbearing influence on democratization

process in the country. The departure of post-independence godfathers from Nigerian polity, and emergence of money-inclined godfathers have threatened the survival of Nigerian nascent democratic experience.

### Conceptual clarification

It is imperative to ask, who is a godfather? And, better still, what is godfatherism? A godfather is a kingmaker, boss, mentor, and principal, while godson is the beneficiary and recipient of the legacy of a godfather. 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. Politics of godfathers involve the 'anointing' of a godson who is expected to win an election by using the influence, wealth, political structure and political experience of the godfather. In return, the godson reciprocates by loyalty and regular consultations with the godfather.

Godfatherism, in its simple form is a term used to describe the relationship between a godfather and godson. Godfathers are slightly different from mafia and election sponsors. Mafianism in politics consist of formidable powerful blocs that have tremendous influence in the society that is, the Kaduna Mafia (Bala and Tyoden, 1987). It comprises of 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. Godfathers are powerful individuals who determine 'who, what, when and how' in the corridors of power. Many godfathers in the present-day Nigeria operates 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'.

Election sponsors, on the other hand are rich individuals that volunteer to donate generously towards the electoral success of a party or sponsor candidates during election. He might be less bothered about active politics or supervision of government business, but expects friendly policies from the government. Nigeria's godfathers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century sponsors election, but not all election sponsors are godfathers.

Godfathers reign across all spheres of the society: academics, legal, and religion environment. There are professors who determine who joins the academics. The relationship between godfather and godson in politics claims the monopolistic use of the term godfatherism; the 'ism' makes it political. Godfatherism thrives across the globe. There is hardly any state devoid of the existence and influence of godfathers, though the level of such influence varies. In America, the political candidates wiggle around, seeking group and individual endorsements for their candidacy. Also, in other advanced societies, group influence and endorsement could be more

valuable than a powerful individual (Ajayi, 2005). The fact remains that prominent member of the society still influence the society in their voting behaviour.

However, the features of Patron-Client politics remain constant. It is based on imbalance of power, existing in the context of face-to-face personal relationship, incorporation of wide range socio-political and economic forms of exchange, display of kick-backs and consideration of cost-benefit theory and availability of vote-giver and vote acceptor.

### Socio-Economic and Political Forces in the Evolution and Consolidation of Godfatherism in Nigeria

Liberalism, as we have experienced in Nigeria, promotes extreme elitist democracy and money-inspired electioneering system, leaving the masses as 'onlooker'. The believe that the dual forces of liberal democracy, and market capitalism are the sure path to development has been shaken by the success of the East Asian Tigers, and the incessant underdevelopment, hopelessness and acute poverty of the vast portions of Sub-Saharan Africa, South America and South Asia (Hyung-Gon,2007:24). Could we attribute our failures to the manipulations of the tenets of liberalism, which kept denying Nigerians the much-needed institutional, socio-economic and political advancement?

The forceful amalgamation of many nationalities, with its resultant ethnic cleavages was responsible for the absence of national political leaders that commands respect through out the country (Sklar, 2006). This was what Sklar called an ethnic-security dilemma. Ethnic groups therefore became the primary lens through which the public views social and political events. Leaders in each zone built strong political base and became godfathers, who commanded enviable followers based on resourceful politics and tried to provide good leadership and not 'leadership of the belly'. These leaders continued to promote godfatherism in the second republic (Onwumere, 2007). Erudite politicians like Obafemi Awolowo in the West, Azikwe (East), and Aminu Kano (North), held the aces as regional godfathers in the 1979 electioneering process. The failure of these godfathers to live above ethnic politics aided the ascendancy of Shehu Shagari as Nigeria's president in 1979.

Awolowo tried in vain to install Pa Alayande during the old Oyo State governorship race against the younger Bola Ige; Jim Nwobodo declared Azikwe as his godfather, while Balarabe Musa triumphed under the tutelage of Aminu Kano (Onwumere, 2007). They knew the relevance of such names in winning election, and there was peaceful coexistence between the two parties. These leaders never imposed their interests on the godsons in a thug-like fashion, instead both worked harmoniously for the entrenchment of good governance (Ezenekwe, n.d).

The power of patronage in Nigeria have a great influence in election results, and the underlying proposition is

that the actual source of power lies neither in the people's vote nor their power to determine their leaders, but in the politician's resources. The influence of resources available to candidates during election changes the masses voting pattern and behavior during election (Buddan, 2006).

The military incursion into politics aided the consolidation of godfatherism in Nigeria. High on the list of their misrule was the promotion of political and economic centralization, corruption, concentration of wealth in the hands of few, allocation of much power to chief executive at all levels, making the position more attractive. General Babangida regime (1985 - 1993) formalized and made corruption very enticing, while Abacha's regime (1993 - 1998) made it worse. State's wealth found its way into the hand of few apologists of the military. These individuals were financially equipped to bankroll any candidates of their choice.

## Findings

A curious review at the phenomenon of godfatherism reveals that nothing is wrong with the globally acclaimed idea. In fact, it helps to nurture democracy and provide opportunities for upcoming politicians to attain political power. The truth is that most honest political aspirants in Nigeria did not possess the financial muscle to win primary, talk less of general election, hiding under the umbrella of godfathers seems logical. The introduction of money-politics into Nigeria political terrain favoured the godfathers, who were ready to sponsor any contestants of their choice. Candidates that was desperate for power had to pledge alliance to the godfather for a guaranteed winning ticket. It was discovered in the study that serious minded aspirants could win election without support from any godfather. The recent declaration of Olusegun Mimiko as the winner of governorship election in Ondo state by the Appeal Court after almost two years of court cases is a point of reference. He defeated the incumbent, Agagu without a known godfather. Also in Edo State, Adams Oshiomole defiled local godfather to claim the governorship seat after a protracted court cases against the incumbent governor, Lucky Igbhenedon.

Study revealed that the status of godfather has nothing to do with age or wealth in Nigeria, but who command most respect in the society, and who have what it takes to win election assumes the status of a godfather. A true godfather was to provide direction, mobilize support, and offer constructive advice based on his own experience in public domain, without imposing his preference on the godson. Money should not necessarily be the driving force. Although, there might be other benefits enjoyed by the godfather, but the godson was free to operate since he would be responsible for his action(s) or inaction(s).

A deeper discourse made it clear that Bola Ige insisted on the adoption of Bisi Akande during the Osun state governorship electioneering process in 1999, because of his

higher political experience in place of Iyiola Omisore, who accepted the position of a deputy governor despite his much financial commitment to the party. The relationship between the two elected officers thereafter became hostile. But Ige, Akande's godfather, rose up in support of his godson: the House impeached Omisore during the resulting crisis. Ige kept emphasizing that it was in the interest of the people for Akande to rule in place of Omisore.

The modus operandi of godfatherism suddenly changed between 1999 and 2007. It got so bad under the watchful eyes of Obasanjo-led government that godfathers assumed different names: gangsters, mafia, and criminals. The worse manifestations of godfatherism in Nigerian history came to life under President Obasanjo's democratic rule for one simple reason; he promoted and allowed it. Some of the godfathers truly possessed all the characteristics of mafianism, many of them behaving like *Al Capone* in a criminal world; but these set of godfathers perpetuated their criminality in enduring political environment.

The Nigerian styled Patron-Client relationship nearly truncated Nigerian puerile democracy in June 10th, 2003. A self-confessed godfather, Uba employed thugs and Nigerian police to abduct his godson, Chris Ngige, who was the elected governor of Anambra State. Ngige's sin was his refusal to allow Uba to nominate all political appointees, take the largest share of state's allocation, and instantly pay him a sum of ₦2.5 billion; the claimed cost of installing Ngige as governor (Onwumere, 2007). Their loyalists embarked in a battle of 'iron' and 'steel'. The State became a war zone, innocent lives were lost, houses were set ablaze, and Anambra state became ungovernable for weeks. It was not a case of two fighting, but a desperate godfather (Uba and his 'troops') consuming everything at their reach when it became clear that his investment was gone down the drain. The only solution the federal government proffered was the threat to declare a state of emergency in the state.

The dust had nearly settled, when the self declared "strongman of Ibadan politics", Adedibu formally declared an unconventional war against his godson, Ladoja, governor of Oyo State (The Punch, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007:16). The bone of contention has always been disagreement over allocation of money political appointments, and the resulting consequences were similar with the Anambra saga. In Ilorin, the 'institutionalized' godfather of Kwara State politics, Olusola Saraki confronted his godson, Lawal Mohammed who he installed as the governor of the state in 1999. He allowed Lawal to complete his tenure before replacing him with his own biological son, while his daughter ended up in the federal legislative House (the Senate)! The manifestation of godfatherism at its climax in Oyo and Anambra state, necessitated people's fear about the dreaded phenomenon as capable of truncating the hard-fought Nigerian democracy: the alarm was right. How could a godfather demand for nominate

eighty percentage of political appointee in a state?

It was submitted that most Nigerian political elites, godfathers and average Nigerians were power-hungry because, access to power means access to a lot; hence, it would be prejudicial to ascribe avarice only to godfathers. Godfathers as displayed in Anambra state was hostile to people's interests and extremely violent without respecting government and its institutions. Most Nigerian political power seekers were driven by too much ambition, corruption, lacking understanding about the workings of democracy and so unprincipled to the extent of swearing to an oath of alliance in a shrine, like the case of Ngige in Anambra State. They played into the hands of the 'political hawks' who called themselves godfathers, because of their own weakness, and acute desperation for power. The godsons erroneously believed they could disengage from the godfathers who were always on 'their neck', using state's power to crush the godfathers as well as their political machineries. Adedibu felt that governor Ladoja was an ingrate who wanted to wipe out his political hegemony in Ibadan politics, while Ladoja claimed that Adedibu was too greedy to be appeased.

## DISCUSSION

Every society has a set of individuals who command respect among the people. Such individuals might not be interested in electoral contests, but somehow determines who represents the people. The acts of forceful compliance and loyalty by threat and blackmail is not involved, rather, the public accords the godson full respect and support. The Nigerian police are the most corrupt, (The Punch, June 14th, 2007:7) ineffective and notorious institution in Nigeria. Yet, nobody calls for its dissolution; but re-organization. Godfatherism has no doubt stunted political development in Nigeria. It held governance at ransom; yet, we could not neglect the inevitability of godfathers in politics. Do we throw the bath water with the baby?

Patron-Client relationship has become a pestilence to democracy in Nigeria. It denied the people the opportunities of political participation. There were cases in Ibadan (capital of Oyo State) where gun-trotting youths, allegedly in support of Adedibu scared people away from casting their votes during the 2003 election (Adedeji, 2009). Democracy is a means to an end: the end is greater happiness for the people. However, in Nigeria, very few political elites, godfathers and their thugs enjoyed the dividends of democracy, while the downwardly mobile masses was kept gaping and scrambling for survival in the midst of enormous Nigeria's wealth.

The plan to do away with godfathers after electoral victory was not that simple. They kept forgetting the strong ties between the people and the godfathers and more importantly, the federal government's support received by the godfathers in the case of governor Ladoja and Ngige. The complicity of the centre government was corroborated

by Wole Soyinka (2004) in his comment that the greatest disservice President Obasanjo has done to the nation was to have promoted the cult of godfatherism, its illegalities, its naked violence, and its corruption.

Could there be a system whereby candidates should fund their elections without recourse to godfatherism? Governor Mimiko in Ondo state and Adams Oshiomole in Edo State weakened the argument for the inevitability of godfathers in politics. There must be a check on the 'uncontrolled' amount of money in use during election process; the government could come up with legislation towards its effect. It is only in Nigeria and few Third World states that placed no limit on the amount of fund individual could donate to political parties, neither would any agency nor society query the source of such fund. Can there be a government sponsored financial help-desk to make available funds to honest politicians? Would it not be better to refrain from monetized electioneering programme by re-orientating the psyche of Nigerians?

Olutola (2009) argued that political parties in Nigeria are far from democratic but revolved around godfathers, which sponsored candidates and fund parties. It was revealed that most of the godfathers, Adedibu for example actually received a lot of money from candidates before throwing their weight behind such contestants. Can there be a return to true party discipline? It is pertinent to discourage the present politics that celebrates loyalty to godfathers. Godfathers should face the reality of a slight shift in the extreme allegiance of the godsons after election. A state executive is responsible for the performance of government; he should be given a free hand to choose his cabinet, and allocate resources for the benefits of the people.

Does the solution lie with the people? What can they do? The masses are most times helpless by the sheer high level of violence and criminalities perpetuated by both godfathers and godsons, leaving them with the option of scrambling for safety. Can there be a consensus among political parties and Nigerians on isolation of all corrupt politicians and trouble maker from politics? Jalil, (Staff Reporter, 2003) seems to be skeptical about this and said:

"If my party expels those elements but others give them shelter, then my party will be eliminated. So, all political parties should come to an agreement on it...law could be formulated to drive out terrorists and godfathers from politics"!

Politics should be made attractive to honest and Resourceful individuals who do not want their clothes stained by the dirt of politics. It would be difficult for godfathers to easily undermine their godsons, if such enjoyed legitimacy built on good performance in office. There should be equality before the law, but in Nigeria, godfathers seem to be above the law. If Uba had faced trial for treason in Anambra, Adedibu and his loyalists would

think twice before unleashing mayhem on the people in Oyo State. Godfathers are part of the society and exhibit the inherent characteristics of that society. They understand the 'iron law' governing the life of men: money. Godfathers would always use the youth as political thugs until there are other means of providing livelihood to the unemployed youths.

The godfathers were so dreaded that voters dare not vote against their 'anointed' sons, as waiting thugs always lurked at the corner, armed with cutlasses and guns: cutlass was very expensive in open during the 2007 election process in Ibadan! Godfathers keep destroying the future of youths, using them to unleash terror against opponents of their godsons. The godsons turned blind eyes at the criminalities committed by these godfathers, but later cried fowl when they were at the receiving end. Did they, (godfathers and godsons) not think of what becomes of these youths after election? Did the godfather not think of the legacy they would leave behind at their exit?

There is high tendency for the emergence of Patron-Client politics in an elitist democracy, where the society is hierarchical patterned like a pyramid. Powerful political elites stand at the top and wield power in their different domain. The power flows from godfathers and they determine the power structure below them. This made politics to become riotous, difficult to manage with anarchic patterns of operations and flagrant abuse of power by both parties. Godfathers were in charge of the political parties and eventually constituted the monopolists that determine the outcomes of governance. This, they accomplished by forcefully taking (financial) control of the states through the godsons.

Politics that ought to be a problem solver suddenly became the problem to be solved in Nigeria. There must be rules governing Nigerian politics, if there ever was, politicians must obey it. The people have the right to enjoy the dividends of democracy, and the federal government has positive roles to play. The public officials who owe their position to the efforts of a godfather incur a debt that they are expected to repay without end throughout their tenure, but the godsons did not hold this dearly in their heart.

The godfathers have successfully taken over the Nigerian political institutions, while the roles of electorates were fast diminishing. The lack of participatory democracy, 'economic' gap between the people and godfathers, and enthusiasm towards the electoral process hinders the institutionalization of party politics in Nigeria.

The godsons have to be politically corrupt, and misappropriate funds before satisfying the neck-breaking financial obligations of godfathers. Therefore, they encourage their godsons to be corrupt, although corruption was naturally inherent in some godsons. Also, lack of accountability in public domain was a motivating factor for the godfathers' insistence on snatching state's financial resources from the political office holders. This necessi-

tated the argument of Shihata (1997) that corruption and patronage politics weakens political institutions, serves as impediments to developments of new political activities, and reduces economic growth. Fagge (1985) also comments in a poem that: Godfatherism a menace to democracy like a thick on a cow or the weed to the crops like HIV virus in a bloodstream with a weak defense mechanism, it kills our hard-earned democracy and mitigate against its progress.

## 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.

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