



## **Kitchen cabinet and Cabalism in Nigerian Democracy: Power, Politics, and Prospect**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of a kitchen cabinet refers to a group of unofficial advisers who wield considerable influence on the president, often with little or no accountability. Cabalism, on the other hand, describes a clique of powerful individuals who manipulate political and economic resources for personal gain, often at the expense of national development. This study examines the role of the kitchen cabinet and cabalism in Nigerian democracy, analyzing the relationship between power, politics, and prospects for democratic governance. Using secondary data, this study finds that the presence of these informal power structures (kitchen cabinet and cabalism) undermines the principles of democratic governance, including transparency, accountability, and participation. The study concludes that there is a need for institutional reforms that address the root causes of kitchen cabinet and cabalism, in order to promote a more inclusive and transparent democratic system in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Power, Politics, Cabal, Governance, Kitchen Cabinet

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### **Introduction**

Nigeria's transition to democratic governance in 1999 was seen as a promising development in a country with a history of military rule, political instability, and corruption. However, the country's democratic journey has been fraught with challenges, including the emergence of informal power structures such as the "kitchen cabinet" and "cabals" that have had a significant impact on the country's politics and governance. The concept of a kitchen cabinet is referring to a group of unofficial advisers who wield considerable influence on the president (Seligman, 1956), is not new to Nigerian politics. The term kitchen cabinet was first used during Andrew Jackson's presidency in the US (1829-37) (Lawrence, 2020). However,



it has become more prominent in recent years, with some critics accusing these groups of hijacking the country's political processes and perpetuating a culture of impunity and corruption (Ogbazghi, 2011). Similarly, the term "cabalism" has gained currency in Nigerian political discourse, Albert (2012), refers to cabal as a clique of powerful individuals who manipulate political and economic resources for personal gain, often at the expense of national development. The presence of these informal power structures, to continually satisfy their demands to the detriment of the national interest (Afolabi & Agunyai, 2017), raises fundamental questions about the quality of Nigeria's democratic governance and its ability to deliver public goods and services to its citizens (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019).

As Aiyede (2015) argue, the influence of kitchen cabinets and cabals in Nigeria's political processes has weakened democratic accountability, leading to a situation where political power is concentrated in the hands of a few individuals with little or no accountability to the public. This has contributed to a culture of impunity and corruption-the tendency is for impunity and corruption to grow unchecked (Afolabi, 2019)-, in the process undermined the legitimacy of democratic governance in Nigeria (Adeola, 2015). To better understand the dynamics of kitchen cabinet and cabalism in Nigerian democracy, this paper seeks to draw on empirical data from secondary sources. The paper will provide a nuanced analysis of the evolving role of these informal power structures in Nigerian politics, exploring the historical evolution of the kitchen cabinet and cabalism in Nigerian politics, the mechanisms through which these networks operate, and their impact on democratic accountability and governance. The paper also argue that institutional reforms are necessary to address the root causes of kitchen cabinet and cabalism in Nigerian politics and promote a more inclusive and transparent democratic system in Nigeria.

### **Historical Context**

In order to unravel the intricacies surrounding the prevalence of a kitchen cabinet and cabalism within the framework of Nigerian democracy, it becomes imperative to embark on a thorough exploration of the historical context that has significantly molded the nation's political trajectory. Nigeria, having gained independence from British colonial rule in 1960 (Wuam, 2012), embarked on a tumultuous journey through a political landscape marred by military coups, authoritarian regimes, and a protracted struggle for the establishment of democratic governance (Colburn, 2020). The post-independence era in Nigeria witnessed a



series of military coups (1966, 1975, 1983, 1985 and 1993) (Ejiogu, 2007), that not only disrupted the democratic process but also left an indelible mark on the nation's political ethos (Webb, 2020). The periodic interventions of the military in governance created a volatile atmosphere (Lewis, 2006), contributing to the erosion of democratic institutions and fostering a climate of political instability (Arowolo & Aluko, 2012). Authoritarian regimes further deepened the imprint of centralized power, as leaders sought to consolidate authority through control mechanisms that extended beyond constitutional frameworks (Osaghae, 2018). As a consequence, power dynamics became skewed, with authority often concentrated in the hands of a select few who wielded significant influence outside the formal structures of government in Nigeria (Vaughan, 2006). This era of political turbulence cultivated a culture where informal power networks, colloquially referred to as "kitchen cabinets and cabalism," emerged as influential hubs of decision-making, operating discreetly and often in parallel with official government structures (Kalu, 2018).

The struggle for democratic governance in Nigeria was punctuated by activism, civil unrest, and a collective yearning for a more inclusive and accountable political system (Arisi, 2015). The legacy of these historical struggles is evident in the contemporary political culture, where remnants of past authoritarianism continue to influence the distribution and exercise of power (Ihonvbere & Shaw, 1998). In essence, the historical backdrop of Nigeria's post-independence journey serves as a crucial lens through which one can comprehend the intricate web of factors contributing to the prevalence of kitchen cabinets and cabalism in the nation's democracy. Therefore the enduring impact of past political vicissitudes on the contemporary socio-political landscape, offering valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for Nigeria's ongoing democratic experiment.

### **Theoretical Insight**

The study adopted elite theory as framework of analysis. The theory was propounded in 1848-1858 by Pareto and Mosca. They proposed that societies consist of two strata - the lower stratum, comprising the non-elite or common men, and the upper stratum, consisting of the elite (Lentz, 2015). Pareto focused on the 'circulation of elite,' emphasizing the consequences of 'open' and 'closed' elites (Keller, 2017). He argued that a closed aristocracy leads to decay, prompting new elites from other classes to emerge for revolutionary change.



Mosca, an Italian jurist and political theorist, asserted that all societies are ruled by a controlling social class, creating a perpetual division between rulers and the ruled (Giuranno & Mosca, 2018). He explained this minority rule by their organization and the superior individuals composing the ruling class. Pareto and Mosca agree on the concept of an elite as a minority holding influence over the majority in society (Zuckerman, 1977). However, they differ in their views on the nature of elites. Pareto emphasizes the universal distinction between ruling elite and the masses, particularly in the context of modern democracy (Delican, 2000). In contrast, Mosca, influenced by Marxian economic class theory, sees the elite as subject to various social factors and acknowledges the unique characteristics of democratic elites (Jackson, 2022).

The elite theory, a lens through which societal power dynamics are examined, contends that power is not uniformly distributed across a populace but instead resides disproportionately within the hands of a select minority (Herring & Henderson, 2012). This framework of analysis finds resonance in the examination of the kitchen cabinet and cabals in the context of Nigerian democratic governance. Within the landscape of Nigerian democracy, the application of elite theory illuminates the existence of a distinct and influential group—presumably composed of political elites—whose impact extends well beyond the formal confines of institutional structures (Gilens & Page, 2014). This elite minority, discussed within the purview of elite theory, emerges as a crucial player in shaping the trajectory of decision-making processes and influencing policy agendas within the democratic landscape (Mariotti, 2022). Their prominence is highlighted in their ability to navigate the complexities inherent in democratic governance, exerting a substantial and often decisive influence on the direction of political affairs (Torfing, 2012).

The relevance of elite theory becomes particularly evident when scrutinizing the consequences of elite influence on democratic outcomes (Keller, 2017). The statement alludes to the potential ramifications, including inequalities, policy biases, and the overall health of the democratic system. The multifaceted ways in which the elite minority secures and maintains its power, includes an exploration of social connections, economic leverage, and strategic alliances, shedding light on the mechanisms through which this influential group perpetuates its dominance (Best & Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). In essence, the application



of elite theory provides a robust foundation for the comprehensive analysis of power dynamics within the Nigerian political landscape. By emphasizing the concentration of power within a select group, this theoretical perspective enables a nuanced understanding of the interactions between the elite minority and the democratic processes at play. It underscores the significance of acknowledging the influence wielded by this minority in shaping not only decision-making processes and policy agendas but also the broader contours of power, politics, and prospects within the realm of Nigerian democracy.

### **Methodology**

This study relies extensively on secondary data sources. It is a desk/literature review. Its research format is qualitative using documentary method of data collection as its instrument of research. The study is predominantly based on information derived from secondary sources. Hence, much of the data was assessed through the review of relevant texts, journals, magazines, newspapers, official publications, historical documents and the Internet. The Data were fittingly utilised for the purpose of this study.

### **Power Dynamics and Politics in the Second and Fourth Republic of Nigeria**

The exploration of power dynamics and political landscapes in the second and fourth republics of Nigeria provides a fascinating journey into the evolution of democratic governance within the country. Following a period of military rule, the country transitioned to a civilian government, ushering in the Second Republic (Ijomah, 2000). The Second Republic, which spanned from 1979 to 1983, emerged as a crucial era in Nigeria's post-independence trajectory (Osaghae, 2018). During this time, Shagari served as Nigeria's civilian president from 1979 to 1983 until a military coup toppled his government (Othman, 1984). Through his presidency, the term "Cabal" wasn't prominent; instead, Nigerians were familiar with the "Kaduna Mafia," a powerful northern group influencing political decisions (Albert, 2005). Led by Dikko, Shagari's Minister of Transport, this Mafia significantly influenced the administration's policies (Othman, 1984). Dikko's dominance extended to making pronouncements considered the official government position, overshadowing the Minister of Information (Onyia, et. al., 2019). In 1982 to 1983, amidst economic challenges, Dikko controversially downplayed austerity measures, leading to public outcry (Onyia, et. al., 2019). The Kaduna Mafia's influence also disrupted the democratic process in 1983,



preventing the planned rotation of the presidency to the south. The military coup that ensued was, in essence, a swift operation by a Cabal, revealing the covert activities shaping Nigerian politics (Osoba, 1996).

Obasanjo's presidency from 1999 to 2007 was characterized by a distinct absence of a Cabal, a term hardly associated with his government (Odigbo & Udalla, 2022). Possessing a strong and assertive personality, Obasanjo took full charge, leaving no room for doubt about his firm control (Oke, 2007). Despite having a competent economic team of technocrats, he prevented their influence from becoming overwhelming, making it clear that he was not bound to follow their advice (Sklar, Onwudiwe & Kew, 2006). Obasanjo, drawing on his military background, employed forceful measures when necessary and even resorted to unconstitutional means to remove elected governors (Aka, 2003), signaling his intolerance for any perceived cabal forming against him (Onyia, et. al., 2019). He established anti-graft agencies, ICPC and EFCC, strategically closing loopholes that could have been exploited by a Cabal (Kalama, 2018). Although governance deficits existed, Obasanjo's robust governance style and opposition handling deterred any attempts to form a Cabal, as individuals were kept in check under the label of "Obasanjo boys," (Albert, 2012).

Yar'Adua, inaugurated on May 29, 2007, passed away on May 5, 2010 (Ibrahim, 2023), prompting Jonathan to complete the remaining tenure and subsequently win the 2011 elections, concluding his presidency on May 29, 2015 (Nwosu, 2022). Yar'Adua reversed some of his predecessor's (Obasanjo) policies, like the sale of refineries to Dangote (Asu, 2021). However, Yar'Adua became ensnared by a cabal that exploited his health challenges to establish a pseudo government (Sesan, 2018). Prominent members of this cabal included Minister of Agriculture, Ruma, Economic Adviser, Yakubu, Chief of Army Staff, Dambazzau, Chief Security Officer, Tilde, and ADC, Onovieda, with support from the President's wife Turai Yar'Adua and Attorney General/Minister of Justice, Aondoaka (Sahara, 2010). The cabal's intrigue intensified in 2009 as the President's health declined, leading to a medical vacation in Saudi Arabia without transmitting a required letter to the National Assembly (Oluchukwu, 2017). This breach of constitutional provision was orchestrated by the cabal to rule the country by proxy during the Yar'Adua's absence, reducing Jonathan to a mere figurehead. Jonathan was barred by the cabal from acting as



President, and information regarding the President's health was concealed from him (Momoh, 2010).

The question of whether a cabal existed during Jonathan's administration is a matter of ongoing debate and speculation, with opinions divided on the extent of secretive and influential groups within the government at that time. While the influence may not have been as conspicuous as it was during his predecessor's term, political commentators frequently allude to the presence of a cabal during his administration (Okeke, 2017). Clark, a prominent Ijaw leader hailing from the same geopolitical zone as the President, and Allison-Madueke, who served as Jonathan's Petroleum Minister, are consistently mentioned as members of this supposed cabal (Abbah, 2012). Clark played a distinct role in the administration by staunchly defending the President's actions and frequently making inciting and provocative statements against those perceived as undermining the government (Shehu, 2012). Strikingly, the Presidency neither cautioned nor called him to order, allowing him to operate without restraint (Lere, 2012).

Meanwhile, allegations by the then Central Bank Governor, Sanusi, claiming that the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), a parastatal under Allison-Madueke's Petroleum Ministry, failed to remit USD 20 billion to the Central Bank, went unanswered by the Presidency. This allegation, among other factors, eventually led to the suspension of the CBN Governor (Udo, 2015). One characteristic of a government captured by a cabal is the apparent immunity of its members from legal sanctions. In the cases of Clark and Allison-Madueke, infractions against the law seemingly went unchecked, reflecting a pattern where individuals operating within the confines of a cabal face no consequences for their actions (Onyia, et. al., 2019). When comparing the prevalence of cabals during Yar'Adua/Jonathan's administration with that of Obasanjo, Albert (2012) observes that the former lacked the ability to wield the same extralegal powers enjoyed by Obasanjo. While Yar'Adua and Jonathan did not possess the deep political and security pedigrees of Obasanjo, they also aimed to avoid being perceived as mere godsons of the former President, contributing to the intricate dynamics that shape power structures within Nigerian politics. President Muhammadu Buhari, was in office from May 29, 2015 to May 28, 2023. The revelation by his wife, 18 months into his presidency, indicates the early influence of a cabal in Buhari's



administration (Sesan, 2018). Ojo (2018) notes that Nigerian government structures often operate through caucuses and cabals. Similar to Yar'Adua, Buhari faced health challenges, leading to extended medical vacations (Ogbeche, 2017). However, he adhered to constitutional requirements, transmitting power to the Vice-President during these absences (Abati, 2022). The cabal's influence was apparent during Buhari's medical trips, notably in 2017 when a "Return or Resign" campaign criticized his prolonged stay in London. The cabal kept the President's health status secret, and their influence was evident when Buhari returned, admitting to severe illness (Ogundipe, 2017). Instances like the DSS sealing the National Assembly without the Acting President's authorization highlighted the cabal's disregard for due process (Jimoh, Abuh, Daka, Opara & Ehiaghe, 2018).

Several events underscored the cabal's dominance. Instances where Buhari claimed ignorance of his Chief of Staff's position on the NNPC board were particularly noteworthy, revealing a significant contradiction considering his role as the Minister of Petroleum Resources (Akinpelu, 2020). The reinstatement of Maina, accused of embezzling police pension funds, showcased the cabal's ability to act without the President's knowledge. Despite subsequent sack orders, those involved faced no sanctions (Olaleye, 2017). Vice-President Osinbajo's revelation that Buhari was unaware of Justice Onnoghen's arraignment until the last minute further highlighted the cabal's control (Erezi, 2019). Members like Chief of Staff, Kyari, former DSS boss, Daura, and influential non-political figure Mamman Daura were frequently cited as members of kitchen cabinets and Cabal in Buhari administration (Akhaine & Ahovi, 2016). This pattern of actions taken in the President's name without his knowledge, coupled with the lack of subsequent reversals, supports the argument that Buhari's presidency has been significantly influenced by a cabal.

Tinubu's historic inauguration as the 16th President of Nigeria on May 29, 2023, marked a significant moment in the country's political landscape (Ameh, 2023). Serving as the Governor of Lagos State from 1999 to 2007, Tinubu's ascent to the presidency unveils intricate power dynamics within his party, characterized by various names like Tinubu's men, the emerging power bloc, and the President-elect's kitchen cabinet (Ebhoimhen, 2023). These influential figures, with close ties to Tinubu, are primarily from Lagos, Tinubu's stronghold, and include notable political figures who have the ears of the President. Among





them are Bisi Akande, Femi Gbajabiamila and Remi Tinubu as well as Seyi Tinubu, who also double as son of the President (Ayantunji, 2023). The Chief of Staff, Gbajabiamila, appears to be the face of the current cabal. During this short period, his name has been coming up whenever things are seen to be going wrong. When “strange” appointments are made and they need to change them, the former Speaker of the House of Representatives is accused of making the blunder (Adetayo, 2023). These individuals, collectively referred to as Tinubu’s men, will play pivotal roles in shaping political decisions and influencing the direction of policies in Tinubu’s government. The emerging power bloc is not limited to a geographical location but extends its influence beyond Lagos, incorporating figures like Osoba and Adeola (Ayantunji, 2023).

The current power dynamics in Tinubu’s administration have raised concerns within the party, with some members perceiving these influential figures as overbearing in their sway over the President (Luqman & Busari, 2023). The situation is further complicated by the variety of names used to describe this influential group, such as the President-elect’s kitchen cabinet, indicating their close advisory role (Nda-Isaiah, 2023). Terminology aside, the group’s significance lies in its ability to shape political decisions and hold sway over key appointments and policy directions. Notably, this influential group includes individuals with diverse backgrounds and political experiences, reflecting a broad coalition that has coalesced around Tinubu (Ochanja & Orokpo, 2013). Referred to as the Lagos Group, there is cautious optimism and a “wait and see” approach regarding their impact on the administration of the president (Ameh, 2023). Some view them as a natural development, akin to the President having his own kitchen cabinet, which serves as an inner circle of trusted advisers. However, concerns have been voiced regarding the potential for Cabal-like behaviour, drawing parallels with the Buhari presidency.

### **Effect of Kitchen Cabinet and Cabalism on Democratic Governance in Nigeria**

The intertwining presence of a kitchen cabinet and cabalism in Nigerian democracy has profound implications for governance, creating an environment marked by a lack of transparency and public scrutiny (Okolie, Omoregie & Iboi, 2015). The consolidation of power within covert networks raises concerns about unchecked abuse, potentially breeding corruption and nepotism (Amundsen, 1999). The absence of robust checks and balances



undermines the foundational principles of democratic governance, challenging the essence of active citizen participation and leader accountability (Carothers, 2014). Moreover, the exclusive nature of these covert networks leads to the exclusion of diverse voices from policy-making, resulting in inadequate policies that fail to address the broader population's needs. This exclusionary dynamic exacerbates societal divisions and grievances, leaving segments of the population feeling marginalized from crucial decision-making processes (Pfundmair, Wood, Hales & Wesselmann, 2022). The impact on governance extends to skewed resource allocation, favoritism, and the pursuit of personal or group interests over the collective welfare, hindering effective public service delivery and perpetuating inequalities. The intricate dance between kitchen cabinets, cabals, and governance necessitates a reevaluation of democratic principles. Covert networks challenge the foundational tenets of democracy, questioning their compatibility with the ideals of a thriving democratic system (Bartels, Daxecker, Hyde, Lindberg & Nooruddin, 2023).

To mitigate these adverse effects, institutional reforms are imperative, focusing on enhancing transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. Strengthening democratic institutions, ensuring independent oversight bodies, fostering a culture of openness, and promoting diversity and public participation are critical steps. Additionally, nurturing democratic values and prioritizing the collective welfare over the interests of a select few are essential for safeguarding the integrity of the democratic process. The coexistence of a kitchen cabinet and cabalism profoundly shapes Nigeria's governance landscape, posing challenges to transparency, inclusivity, and accountability. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to implement institutional reforms and promote a governance paradigm aligned with democratic ideals, ensuring that the nation reflects the aspirations of its people and upholds the principles of democracy.

### **Challenges of Kitchen Cabinet and Cabalism to Accountability in Nigerian Democratic Governance**

The prevalence of kitchen cabinets and cabalism presents a formidable challenge to accountability within the Nigerian political landscape. The clandestine nature of decision-making behind closed doors creates a significant barrier to holding those in power accountable for their actions (Ijewereme, 2015). The absence of transparency fosters an environment where individuals within the kitchen cabinet can act with impunity, shielded



from public scrutiny and the checks and balances inherent in a robust democracy (Yagboyaju, 2011). This erosion of accountability undermines fundamental democratic principles, including transparency, public participation, and adherence to the rule of law. The challenge lies in rectifying this imbalance, ensuring that decision-makers are held accountable for their actions and that governance remains transparent and aligned with the democratic aspirations of the Nigerian people. Efforts to enhance accountability mechanisms, promote transparency, and reinforce the rule of law are crucial in addressing this pressing challenge and fostering a political environment that truly reflects the values of a vibrant democracy.

### **Prospects for Transparency and Accountability**

Despite the challenges posed by a kitchen cabinet and cabalism, there are prospects for enhancing transparency and accountability in Nigerian democracy (Lawrence, 2020). Strengthening democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, civil society organizations, and the media, can play a crucial role in holding those in power into check and accountable (Scholte, 2004). Additionally, promoting a culture of transparency and inclusivity within the government and fostering public participation can help mitigate the influence of a kitchen cabinet. Implementing robust anti-corruption measures and ensuring the equitable distribution of resources can also contribute to a more accountable and transparent governance system.

### **Conclusion**

The intricate interplay of kitchen cabinets, cabalism, and governance in Nigerian democracy necessitates a thorough examination of the nation's political landscape. Examining historical context, theoretical insights, and power dynamics across different presidencies unveils the challenges posed by covert networks. The manifestation of kitchen cabinets aligns with theoretical frameworks on cabalism, emphasizing secrecy, exclusivity, and a close-knit structure. From the Kaduna Mafia in the Second Republic to the dynamics of Obasanjo, Yar'Adua, Buhari, and Tinubu's presidencies, each era exposes unique challenges in the exercise of power. The impact on governance is significant, with power concentration leading to a lack of transparency, potentially fostering corruption and limiting inclusive policy-making. Exclusionary practices contribute to societal divisions, impeding effective governance. Challenges to accountability arise from covert decision-making, eroding transparency and undermining democratic ideals. Prospects for improvement involve



strengthening democratic institutions, promoting transparency, fostering public participation, and implementing anti-corruption measures. Institutional reforms, including ensuring oversight body independence, fostering openness, and prioritizing diversity, are crucial steps toward a more transparent and accountable governance system. The future of Nigerian democracy hinges on a commitment to these reforms, dedication to democratic values, and an active citizenry. Addressing challenges posed by kitchen cabinets and cabalism is pivotal for creating a political environment that genuinely reflects the aspirations of the Nigerian people and upholds democratic principles.

### **Recommendations**

1. **Institutional Reforms:** Advocating for institutional reforms in Nigeria to address the menace of kitchen cabinet and cabalism, fostering improvements in transparency, accountability, and inclusivity within democratic governance structures.
2. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Implementing public awareness campaigns to educate citizens about the negative effects of kitchen cabinets and cabals on democratic governance, emphasizing civic engagement, active participation, and leader accountability.
3. **Media Vigilance:** Promoting media vigilance to expose and scrutinize kitchen cabinets and cabals enables investigative journalists to uncover covert decision-making processes and hold powerful individuals accountable.
4. **Civil Society Engagement:** Strengthen civil society organizations to actively advocate for democratic values, monitor government actions, promote citizen participation, and push for policy changes discouraging the formation of informal power structures.
5. **Legislative Oversight:** Advocating for heightened legislative oversight to ensure government decisions align with democratic principles, supporting the creation and enforcement of laws that deter power concentration in informal groups and promote transparency in decision-making processes.
6. **Judicial Independence:** Strengthening the judiciary's independence as a crucial component of checks and balances ensures impartial rulings on matters of political influence, corruption, and abuse of power.



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