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**Godfatherism in the Politics of Nigeria: An Exposé**

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## **Abstract**

*There is a new political phenomenon that is becoming a thing of concern to all and sundry; this emergent phenomenon is the concept of “godfatherism.” It is an ideology which deprives the people of their fundamental human rights of not benefiting from the dividends of democracy. This practice is rapidly converting politics from a civil engagement to an enterprise where only the moneybags are beneficiaries; these godfathers rely on their wealth whereby they sponsor candidates of their choice because of their influence. This paper intends to discuss the predatory variant of godfatherism which is the one that offends and negates moral sensibility and collective aspiration of the people. In Nigeria, the concept of godfatherism and politics will be defined and a theoretical framework of analysis will be provided. The paper looks at the case of the activities of godfathers in some selected states. The paper will also spell out the implications of predatory behaviour of godfathers in Nigeria.*

## **Introduction**

An emergent feature of politics in Nigeria is the phenomenon of godfatherism. The political class has been instrumental in propagating this political orientation which deliberately nurtures the corruption of the electoral process, governmental structures and equally ensures that the electoral process and state power are skewed towards satisfying the selfish interest of the dominant political mentors otherwise known as “political godfathers.” According to John (2006, p.78), godfatherism has become a scary phenomenon in Nigeria politics. This is because; godfathers have sustained a reputation for deploying their wealth to secure party nomination for candidates of their choice, sponsor their elections including manipulating the electoral process for their selfish interest. This dominant political culture has not only been sustained by the privileged few but has become perverse and is today a major source of tension and political instability in the polity.

Often, the influence of the godfathers is only significant within the parties where they operate. However, in the event that a party controls

the government, their influence equally radiates the electoral landscape of the entire political constituency and their support can secure electoral victory. Festus (2005) corroborates this fact when he states that “there are some other notables whose influence transcends the political party. Hence, they are considered as political colossus in their various constituencies and are sought after by parties and candidates alike because of their ability to condition the electoral fortunes in favour of their perceived loyalists.” Therefore, the focus of this paper shall be on the antecedents of godfatherism in politics of Nigeria and its place in the competitive struggle for power and resources.

### **Conceptualization of Godfatherism and Politics**

Godfatherism has multiplicity of definitions by different scholars. According to Gambo (2006, p.90) Godfatherism in a broad sense is an ideology which is constructed on the belief that certain individuals possess considerable means to unilaterally determine who gets party ticket to run for an election and who wins in the electoral contest. In other words, they are men who have the ‘power’ and influence to decide both who gets nominated to contest election and who wins in the election. Similarly, Gabriel (2005, p.3) posits that Godfatherism is the practice of political office seekers getting connected to an individual who is believed to have the ability to deliver desired outcome in an electoral contest.

Due to the overbearing influence of the political godfathers on political office seekers, the latter are robbed of their independence; thus they become mere surrogates and are conditioned in such a way that they become totally subservient to their godfathers. Mbamara aptly asserts that godfatherism invasion of the polity is for the nomination of political candidate for the purpose of selfish gratification (2004, p.143). It is a political slave trade or political sponsorship based on political manipulation with several evil agenda. Mbamara continually averred that:

The godfather is the political slave merchant while the godson is the political slave or slave boy or political article for sale. The godson is purchased with big sum of money under a demonic oath. Their aims and objectives include appointments, stealing, robbery and looting of government treasury. The decision-making appointments and contract award is usually manipulated by the godfather. It is like drug abuse. (2004, p.143)

The problem associated with the cancerous phenomenon is that the perpetrators are no less a people in the society. The paradox here is that these godfathers do not share the core defining attributes of God. Political parties lack the capacity to act contrary to the wishes and aspirations of these godfathers because they look up to them to bankroll their campaigns and to use their influences to see their candidates through elections. Their influences at certain point even overshadow the judiciary and court orders are seemingly not regarded (ibid); and godfatherism has become the bane of Nigeria democracy, especially in states such as Oyo, Anambra and Kwara.

Politics unlike other concepts has series of definitions by different scholars. David Easton in his several writings (1957, 1965, and 1971) conceptualized politics as the “authoritative allocation of values” in a similar vein; Harold (1936, 1963) viewed politics as being centred on power; for him, politics is about “who gets what, when and how” Politics, according to German Jew, Karl Max (1984), who as far as he was concerned, is an inter class struggle for a redistribution of social goods because “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (p. 84). Thus, this paper defines politics as the competitive pursuit of private interest and the determination of public policy defined by class relation.

Theoretically, this paper will employ the theory of the Mitchelian “Iron law of oligarchy” which is to the effect that power abhors vacuum and a leader often emerges to steer the course of any organization. The emergence of such powerful individuals or clique

whittles down the prescriptive power of the organization and the powers of the oligarchy increase as the hold of the organization decreases. The emergence of the oligarchy signals the decline of party and the rise of impunity i.e. godfather. The oligarchy therefore survives if and when he is assured of the protection of misdemeanor.

### **Godfatherism in the Politics of Nigeria**

According to Ibrahim Jibril cited in Gambo (2004, p. 92), the origin of godfatherism in the electoral politics could be traced to the city of Chicago in the United States of America in the pre World War II era. He further asserts that it was within this period that “the heads of criminal gangs sponsored politicians in elections, manipulated the results to get them elected in return, received protection and contracts from their godsons”. It can be seen from this cryptic account of origin that the key defining characteristics of godfatherism in the USA and in Nigeria are broadly speaking, similar. That is, manipulation of election results by influential characters in favour of certain category of politicians.

Godfatherism is not a recent phenomenon in the Nigerian electoral politics. Contrary to widely held believe that it is a creation of the fourth republic, the phenomenon dates back to the 1960s when the first generation of Nigerian politicians through some constitutional arrangements, wrestle political power from the British who took their exit from the country on October, 1.1960. Ujo (2006) contends that the likes of Sir Ahmadu Bello, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo carefully cultivated godsons whom they believed would build on their legacies. Furthermore, he asserts that the chief motivation of doing so was not to use godsons as surrogates to promote parochial interest but to promote the developmental aspirations of the people.

Therefore, a distinction between the first generation politicians and the fourth generation politicians has been established by scholars. In the first republic according to Damson (2008, p. 24), Godfatherism is a welcome development in decent political playground. The young

has to go under the tutelage of an experienced and elderly statesman to acquire the skill of governance and imbibe the charisma of his godfather as political ingredients in his career as a well groomed politician. For example, Chief Obafemi Awolowo mentored millions of Yoruba nationality without mortgaging the interest of the Western Region; Alhaji Ahmadu Bello and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa mentored many northerners without extracting any economic benefits from the region; Sir Odumegwu Ojukwu mentored Honourable Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe who in turn groomed many younger politicians without using them as stooges (or state money-making-machines). The contention here is that godfatherism in the first republic was a noble venture as it set the stage for political mentorship.

Godfathers see electoral politics as a huge investment opportunity with considerable promise of massive returns and may not hesitate to employ whatever means, legitimate and illegitimate tangible and intangible to actualize their goal. Godfathers operate in Nigerian politics with impunity because of their immense influence. For instance, Chris Uba, one of the notorious self-styled godfathers in Nigeria Fourth Republic once boasted thus '*I am the greatest godfathers in Nigeria*'. This was the first time an individual single-handedly put in position every politician in the state, a situation which is uncommon in an ideal democracy. Ideally, the self-styled godfather was suppose to be investigated and if found guilty, be punished as prescribed by the 2001 electoral Act. However, Chris Uba was instead rewarded with an appointment as a member of Board of Trustees of the ruling People Democratic Party (PDP) in Anambra State in the 2003 (Gambo 2006). This scenario lays credence to the theory that godfathers manipulate electoral process to have their anointed godsons into public offices in exchange for protection and patronage.

To throw more light on the concept of godfathers, first generation godfathers were involved in the normative search for credible candidates by ensuring their behavioural values and antecedents are accepted before electing or appointing them into public offices but the fourth generation godfathers displayed "negative godfatherism" which

has eaten deep into the fabrics of our political and socio economic advancement. Our pioneer godfathers demonstrated healthy and positive godfatherism. They fixed their godsons based on merit. They never wanted to reap material rewards from the government, they helped to install but their common objectives were the promotion of party ideologies, peoples' welfare and caring leadership (Timionu 2013, p. 1).

At this juncture, it has become obvious that there are two types of godfathers, positive godfathers and negative godfathers; the first generation godfathers displayed positive godfatherism while the fourth generation godfathers are displaying negative godfatherism. Supporting the above argument on the activities of godfathers, John (2006, p. 83), asserts that the godfathers in the fourth republic are selfish and deceptively philanthropic working for other people sometimes for exaggerated political recompense. The father is not in the business of philanthropy. In fact it is the intention of the godfather to rule by proxy. Often times, godfathers are not qualified to hold office as prescribed by laws. They therefore succeeded in circumventing the law by installing their protégé. Consequently, all aid is tied. The relationship between the godfather and the godson is not free floating. It is contractual and the contract is sometimes written and even sealed spiritually with an oath or, at the extreme in a shrine. The Ubah-Ngige relationship was sealed in the shrine at Okija in Anambra state. Their strategies are everything but fair; they dispense violence freely and fully on those who stand on their way. Under such circumstance, they play the additional role of warlord. They often establish, train and maintain a standing personal "army" which they ostensibly supplement with a sprinkling of the official police detachment in order to effect electoral change. They also bribe electoral officials and other security agents to manipulate election results. The gesture is often reciprocated by the godson upon resumption of office. Thus, the initial support given by the godfather then becomes an investment with a colossal rate of returns because the godfather becomes the 'de facto' leader. The godfather makes

substantial critical governance decisions, appointments and he is a recipient of either major juicy contracts or earns inordinate stipends.

The godfather is the political slave merchant while the godson is the political slave or slave boy or political article for sale. Their aims and objectives include appointments, stealing, robbery and looting of government treasury. The decision-making process, appointments and contract award is usually manipulated by the godfather (Mbamara, 2004 p.143). Little wonder, in electoral contest, certain candidates are ascribed the status of government candidates and at the end of the contest, such persons often emerge as the winners of the election and afterwards, employ anti-democratic means of ensuring that the social ill is perpetuated indefinitely. Thus, the phenomenon of godfatherism in Nigeria fits into what Richard Joseph, persuasively described as *"prebendal politics"* (Richard, 2004), where primitive accumulation is exalted far and above the interest of the people. Therefore, the relationship that exists between the godfather and the godson can be described as exploitative and total subversion of the will of the people. At the end, the godson is incapacitated and cannot provide the essential social services to the generality of the populace. The implication of this pattern of relationship is increased level of poverty, unemployment, diseases, illiteracy will be the order of the day. It is on this note that we will attempt to look at the case study of some States in Nigeria that have experienced godfatherism since the inauguration of the Fourth Republic in 1999.

In Anambra state for example, the (godfather) Chief Emeka Offor supported Chief Chinwoke Mbadinuju (godson) to "win" the 1999 governorship election. During the administration, the governor was struggling with the godfather in order to free the resources of the state which diverted his attention from governance. The fracas between the two led to the inability of the administration to deliver dividends of democracy to the people to the extent that they were voted out of office in 2003 governorship elections. In 2003 Mbadinuju was denied ticket but he defected to Alliance for Democracy in which the election



was rigged in favour of a different godson under the influence of a different godfather.

The new godfather at this juncture was Chris Ubah; a secondary school leaver who was younger than the godson supported Chris Ngige under the platform of Peoples Democratic Party and manipulated the election results in favour of his godson. That prior to the election, Chris Ubah and Chris Ngige had gone to the Okiji shrine to sign a covenant of a relationship in which the governor was to continue to show appreciation to Chris Ubah. Isaac (2005, p. 1) succinctly stated,

Take it or leave it, the archetype godfather in Nigeria is more than the ruthless Mario Puzo's kingpins in the Italian Mafia setting. While the fictional godfather is characterized as 'a shadowy, dare-devil recluse, who combines immense under world financial muscle with near mythical powers of enormous proportions', which is to attain a further greasing of the ever-increasing vast financial empire, the Nigeria type has the added characterization of conceit, ego, loquacity, pettiness, envy, strife, crudity, and confusion.

Apparently, on the Anambra case, Dr. Chris Ngige reneged and Chris Ubah fought back by confessing that Dr. Chris Ngige didn't actually win the election. Chris Ubah confessed that he had been instrumental in falsifying the figures that gave Ngige the electoral victory. He was abducted by the police and whisked away to unknown destination. He was saved by a phone call, the abduction failed, the Assistant Inspector General of police Mr. Ige who led the abduction team was retired and died shockingly, unexpectedly thereafter (Oyoade, 2006 p. 85). It is in support of the above statement that, Audu (2006, p. 94), stated that, Chris Ubah had negotiated the most sinister agreement in the Okija Shrine with Dr. Chris Ngige his son. Chris Ubah used his money influence to have his godson returned as the governor of Anambra state. No sooner was Ubah's godson sworn in than trouble started over the immediate enforcement of the terms of the mutually accepted agreement.

Preceding the election, Dr. Ngige, perhaps upon reflection, fought back to save the resources of the state for the common good of the people of Anambra state. Chris Ubah wanted to have 10 of his cronies out of the 17 commissioners to be appointed by his godson. He proposed chief secretary for the governor and chief of staff. When the godson declined to yield to any of these demands, the godfather demanded for a sum of three billion naira as compensation for financing the campaign of Dr. Ngige, for the first time in the history of Nigeria, a serving governor was abducted for nearly a whole day but reluctantly reinstated by a court order.

The question is, in whose command was late AIG Ige discharging his functions? The governor had his security as long as he occupied Anambra state Government House, Awka. Dr. Ngige's election was later invalidated by an election petition Tribunal in Awka. The verdict of the tribunal was challenged by Ngige at the court of appeal. The court of appeal after a painstaking review the case, upheld the verdict of the tribunal thereby sending Ngige out of Government House paving way for Peter Obi of ALL Progressive Grand Alliance to take over as the validly elected Governor of the state in 2005 (ibid). Thus, in 2009 governor Peter Obi was re-elected for the second term because he had the machinery of the state and he won the election and continued as the governor of the state till March, 2014.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) blew the whistle for the next person to occupy the Anambra Government House which was slated to take place on the 16th of November 2013; the INEC displayed its inadequacies at the highest order by declaring the election inconclusive and rescheduled 30th November, 2013 to conclude the election. Based on the confession, the chairman of the commission admitted that the election was flawed and they are going to investigate those that were involved. At this time, Chris Ubah now in People's Democratic Party in which he personally contested the governorship primaries but lost to Tony Nwoye (P.D.P) and Chris Ngige joined the All Progressives Congress (A.P.C) as the governorship aspirant. Some of the contestants for the governorship

seat include: Willie Obiano of All Progressive Grant Alliance (A.P.G.A), Tony Nwoye of Peoples Democratic Party (P.D.P), Ifeanyi Ubah of Labour Party (L.P) etc. The incumbent governor had established himself as a godfather by having Willie Obiano as his godson and succeeded in installing him as the governor of the state. He has since been sworn in. Time shall tell what will happen in the near future.

Kwara State is popularly known as Saraki Dynasty. In other words, it is referred to as the property of Saraki, this is because the phenomenon of godfatherism has become pronounced and deeply enshrined as if it is constitutional. Thus Dr. Olusola Saraki made his wealth from medical profession and took advantage of the poverty level of the people by providing the social infrastructures and food which the government cannot provide. He used the opportunity to exploit the people and cultivated godsons to determine the electoral contest of the entire state. He decided who will occupy what positions in Kwara state. He stated his role as godfather of Kwara politics as early as 1979, the genesis was that, he sponsored Alhaji Adamu Attah as the gubernatorial candidate but eventually he emerged as the governor of the state. There was a friction between the duos of the leadership of the State which made Dr. Olusola Saraki to shift his support to Chief Cornelus Adebayo who was then in Unity Party of Nigeria and he won the 1983 governorship election. At this point, he continued with his role in the fourth republic as observed by Gambo (2006, p. 96). In 1999, he adopted Alhaji Mohammed Lawal as his godson and made him a governor on the platform of the then All Peoples Party. However, towards the twilight of his time, a fundamental misunderstanding developed between the godson and the godfather. The disagreement festered to such a point that anarchy was let loose in the state and 2003 election year was fast approaching. Governor Lawal lost out in the political fray between him and his erstwhile godfather. In 2003, Saraki crossed over to the Peoples Democratic Party (P.D.P) on which platform his son, a medical doctor, contested the governorship. Mohammed Lawal become orphaned as a result of this development and consequently lost the

governorship contest to Dr. Bukola Saraki. To show the strength of his clout in the state, one of Senator Olusola Saraki daughters was elected as member of the senate in 2003. It is quite unprecedented in the political history of Nigeria to have biological brother and sister elected as governor and Senator at the same time.

As soon as Dr. Bukola Saraki emerged as the governor of the state in the 2003 election, battle ensued between godson and godfather on the lean resources of the state which caused division between real biological godson and real godfather. At the completion of his mandatory second term tenure in 2011, he had established his own empire based on the cold war between him and his father, thus he solidified his position at the demise of Dr. Olusola Saraki (godfather) on 14th November 2012. It was more or less a monarchical system of administration where his godson a real biological son inherited his position as godfather of Kwara state politics. In the 2011 governorship election, a new and powerful godfather emerged, Dr. Bukola Saraki. He adopted Alhaji Abdulfatah Ahmed (godson) as the governor; he eventually won with the support of his godfather. One Mr. Bio confessed that he was the right candidate for the position and he had a good relationship with late Olusola Saraki but his godson Senator Bukola Saraki dropped him and adopted Abdulfatah Ahmed. He said that this time around, a battle line has been drawn between him and Senator Bukola Saraki. Who knows what will happen tomorrow or in the 2015 electoral contest? Time shall tell.

In Oyo State, Late Chief Lamidi Adedibu who was widely known as the father of Ibadan politics accepted to play the role of godfather to Lam Adesina in the 1999 governorship election. Late Chief Adedibu used his wealth of experienced to rig the election which led to the electoral victory of Lam Adesina as the governor of the State under the umbrella of Alliance for Democracy between 1999 and 2003. On resumption of office, trouble erupted between them as rightly observed by Regan (2005). The governor expended the greater part of his time slugging it out with his estranged godfather who probably felt short changed by his godson. Even though the governor managed to

complete his tenure of four years, the godfather denied him a second term in the 2003 general elections.

Gambo (2004, p. 95) added that after he discarded Lam Adesina in 2003, Chief Adedibu adopted senator Rasheed Ladoja as his new godson and anointed him, Senator Ladoja as the godson of Adedibu sought and obtained the ticket of the Peoples Democratic Party for the governorship election in Oyo state. The demands ranged from the inclusion of the godfathers cronies into the godson's cabinet, award of juicy contracts, to payment of huge sum of money on monthly basis. He further stated that, Governor Ladoja felt he was losing his powers to Adedibu and decided to fight, back. The disagreement culminated in the impeachment of governor Ladoja who had clearly become political orphan. Chief Adedibu claimed that he was not getting enough returns from his investment and blames this on his godson uncanny greed. Chief Adedibu was more or less a motor park tout who can determine single handedly the direction of Oyo politics. Incontrovertibly, Oyo state is one of the few states in Nigeria with heavy concentration of well educated elite in the country with Chief Adedibu deciding on behalf of the people, who govern. The result of the cold war between Adedibu and Ladoja led to the overthrow of Ladoja and his replacement by his deputy Adebayo Aloa Akala from 2003 to 2011. The political career of the godfather of Ibadan politics came to a standstill after his sudden death.

Thus, from the preceding cases, even though by no means exhaustive, it would be appreciated that the concept of godfatherism is, as noted by jibrin (2004), firmly establishing itself as a guiding principle in contemporary Nigerian politics.

### **Implications of Godfatherism in Nigerian Politics**

According to Chibuzo O. (2006), the issue of greedy godfathers in the Nigerian political scene has now reached epidemic proportions. Just like bribery, corruption, nepotism and fraud, the perpetrators want to make it a way of making a living. There has been a lot of crises in Nigerian politics and Administration a crisis of confidence in our

elected officials, loss of faith in our democratic government and an increasing frustration at government, and more also, an increasing frustration at the irrelevance of individual's vote in our political process. All these crises are crises caused by the unholy alliance of godfatherism (Ikejiani, 2006). Thus some of the implications of the activities of godfathers in Nigerian politics can be summarized as follows:

1. The actions of these godfathers often results in the destruction of lives and properties. As a result of contest for supremacy between godfathers and their protégés, private and government properties as well as the lives of innocent people have been destroyed.
2. Another implication of godfatherism is that it has led to breakdown of law and order, thereby paving way for some hooligans to exploit the opportunity to unleashed terror on citizens. A cogent example is the outlawed Islamic sect Boko Haram, Niger Delta militants and some isolated cases like the “Yan Hisba” of Kano, “Yan sara suka” of Bauchi and the Yan kalari of Gombe State.
3. The most deadly effect of the role of godfathers in the politics led to the increase in crime rate. Godfathers recruits youths as foot soldiers and armed them by given them necessary logistics. The aftermath of this situation is kidnapping, cultism, armed robbery, human trafficking, drug abuse etc.
4. Maladministration and unaccountability. This scenario often plays out in Nigeria politics. The result is outright exclusion of the people from the decision making process of government. Consequently, the rule of law, due process, and transparency in the management of public affairs are all abused in a bid to actualize their goals.
5. Another grievous implication of godfatherism in Nigerian politics is that political office seekers are robbed of their independent and rational sense of judgment and personal

dignity, they become mere surrogates and subservient to their godfather.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

According to Bernard (2009), that there is need to painstakingly seek to curb the existing wide spread practice of godfatherism which has considerable implications for the integrity of Nigeria's electoral system. The conversion of politics from being a civil engagement to a commercial enterprise through the practice of godfatherism, especially the predatory variant, portends threat to the future of democracy in Nigeria.

- a. Appropriate legislation by government should be enacted to check the behaviour of these godfathers; stiffer sanctions must be enshrined in the constitution so as to deter anybody that may be tempted to make such a practice a vocation.
- b. The government should reconsider the issue of independent candidacy. This is necessary so as to reduce the over bearing influence on candidates by those acclaimed financial moguls who have the capacity to buy the conscience of the political party platform.
- c. There is the need to restructure the electoral commission (INEC) since it is critical to the success of democracy in Nigeria. This has become pertinent so as to weed off the complications which often arise during elections as a result of the wanton abuse of electoral processes by the self-styled godfathers.
- d. The role of civil society organizations in combating this monster is very vital. The civil society organizations in Nigeria must ensure independence in decision making and supervision. Furthermore, they must ensure proper enlightenment of the citizens on their rights.

- e. The anti-craft institutions of government such as Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) should be independent of the office of the Attorney General of the Federation to enable them discharge their own responsibilities without fear or favour. They should be more rigorous and robust in pursuing organized crime in all ramifications across all facets of the economy, morality should also be incorporated. This will guard against the laundering of ill-gotten wealth during election periods.

In conclusion, the practice of godfatherism poses' serious threat to the survival, growth and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria as it excludes the vast majority from participating in the democratic process. We are inclined to believe that the harrowing experiences of godsons in the current dispensation will make politicians to think twice before they go into any immoral deal with godfathers whose only motivation for sponsoring candidates for election is to harvest dividends generously from it.

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