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## Local Government Administration and Political Accountability in Nigeria: Contending issues and the way forward.

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the contending issues in local government administration and political accountability in Nigeria and the way forward.*

*It presents an appraisal of Nigeria's experience with the local government administration and the factors militating against the attainment of political accountability which has affected the provision of social services at the local level. Secondary data formed the basis of data collection, interpretation and analysis. Data were collected through a comprehensive review of relevant literature on the subject of inquiry. The thrust of analysis was systematically presented under select themes and sub-themes designed to address the salient aspects of the paper's objective. The theoretical framework of analysis is the Elite theory. The paper observes that despite the 1976 local government reform which was aimed at restructuring the greater political participation and economic empowerment at the local government level, empirical evidence has shown that accountability and good governance are yet to take their rightful place at the grassroots level in Nigeria because the Constitution establishing them does not allow the rural populace to have control or checks on the elected officers. Findings from the study led to the conclusion that to bring about a regime of political accountability in Nigeria, the first measure is constitutional reform to ensure total local government autonomy. Second, is the scrapping of State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC). The paper concludes that if the above measures are employed, the local government would improve in its administration and political accountability to the people.*

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**Keywords:** *Local Government, Local Government Administration, Government, Political Accountability, Good Governance.*

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### **Introduction**

The primary purpose of local Government is to bring government to the local communities so that the local people can participate fully in the process of government in order to provide essential local services and thus accelerate social, economic and political development (Ogunna 1998). It is in the light of the foregoing that the Guidelines for the Local Government Reform OF 1976 gave the principal aim of local Government as:

- (a) To make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representatives bodies.
- (b) To facilitate the exercise of democratic self-government close to the local levels of our society, and to encourage initiative and leadership potential
- (c) To mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development, and
- (d) To provide a two-way channel of communication between local communities and government.

The local Government is thus designed to lay a solid political and economic foundation for grassroots socio-economic and political development.

Accordingly, former president Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida as cited in Ogunna, 1996 put it aptly:

Growth point must emerge from local government areas and provide the much needed push to activate and energize productive activities in rural Nigeria and to reverse the Phenomenon of Rural-Urban drift.

There is no doubt that government exists primarily to provide essential services that will make life worth living. Local government administration plays a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness and provision of public goods to the vast rural population. The creation of local government anywhere in the world stems from the need to facilitate development at the grassroots (Agba, Akwara & Idu, 2013). All political systems seek the attainment of effective and efficient service delivery at the grassroots. This is because local Government administration anywhere in the world affects the day-to-day activities of the citizen at the grassroots. Thus whatever is the mode of government, local government has essentially been regarded as path to, and generation of national integration and development (Arowolo, 2008).

Modern Local government administration in Nigeria began during the British colonial rule/ the Native Authority era. During the colonial administration, the District commissioner was the principal British officer in charge of the administration of the Division. For the purpose of effective administration of the protectorate, each protectorate which was placed under the governance of a high commissioner was divided into administrative provinces. But the Native Authority system was not uniform.

The 1976 local government reform introduced a uniform system of local Government administration throughout the country which recognized local government as a third tier of government and granted financial and functional autonomy to local Government administration. The reform was a major departure from the previous practice of local Government administration (Oriasuyi, Idaho and Isiraojie, 2010).

In spite of this reform and other reforms in the local government, citizens are yet to fill the impact of local Government administration in Nigeria. Although Local governments are most endowed in resources with ever annually expanding budgets in Nigeria, yet corruption and political elites have remained strong holds on political power and reduced its citizens to poverty and destitution. In this regard, it has been concisely argued in Mbah (2011), that politicians in Nigeria are no longer accountable to the voters. Hence, the level of political corruption and lack of discipline demonstrate that the tenet and principles of accountable have become akin to a mirage in Nigeria (Idike, 2016). The main objective of this paper is to examine the contending issues in local government administration and political accountability in Nigeria. Other specific objectives are:

- i) Examine the roles of state governors in the administration and governance of local governments in Nigeria.
- ii) Suggest appropriate recommendations within the context of the identified problems.

### **Conceptual Clarifications:**

#### **Local Government**

The conceptualization of the term “Local Government” has been problematic. This is because there is no unanimous acceptable definition of local government among the scholars of local government and Public administration. However, Kyenge (2013) posits that the concept of local Government has been given various definitions by various scholars, but no matter how differently the concept is defined, it focuses on the transfer of political powers to

local areas by involving the inhabitants in the provision of basic needs in the respective communities. Onwe (2004), defines local government as the smallest government created to take care of all local interests that require government attention. Okoli (2005), defines local government as a unit of government, established by act of law, to administer the function of government, and see to the welfare and interest of the local dwellers, under the local government system. According to him, government at this level guarantees a situation in which the local people can elect their representatives, who can make decisions on matters relating to the interest of the people and make rules in their areas of jurisdiction. The United Nations Office for Public Administration quoted in Adeyemi, (2012:187), defines local Government as thus:

A political sub division of a nation or (in a federal system) state, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or to exact labour for prescribed purpose. The governing body of such entity is elected or otherwise locally selected.

Along this dimension, the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (1976) defines local Government as a political subdivision of a national or regional government which performs functions which in nearly all cases receives its legal power from national or regional government but possess some degree of discretion on the making of decisions and which normally has some taxing power.

The concept of local government contends Abonyi (2011), involves a philosophical commitment to democratic participation in the governing process at the grassroots level. This according to Idike (2016) implies legal and administrative decentralization of authority of power, and personnel by a higher level of government to a community, with a will of its own, performing specific functions as within the wider national framework.

Ogunna (1996), defined local Government as a political authority which is purposely created by law or constitution for local communities by which they manage their public affairs within the limits of law/constitution. There are five main implications of the above definition. First, local government is a political authority which implies that it is a level of government vested with legislative and executive powers to make and executive laws and policies. Secondly, it is created by law or constitution which defines its structure, functions and powers. Third, it is government created at the local level, as it is the government which is nearest to the people. As such it feels the greatest impact of the needs and problems of the people. Fourthly, it is a government in which the people manage their affairs. This leads us to the fifth implication that a Local Government operates within the law or constitution.

The 1976 Nigeria Local Government Reforms sees local government as “Government at the local level exercised through representative council established by law to exercise specific powers within a defined area” (1976 Guidelines for Local Government reforms). Arising from the above definitions, we can reasonably be sure of what local government is all about.

### **Political accountability**

Political Accountability is a fundamental feature in any effective public administrative system. It presupposes that all governmental departments have to be efficient because they have to ensure value for tax payers’ money.

Bassey (2014), defines political accountability as the accountability of government, civil servant and politicians to the public and to the legislative bodies such as congress or parliament. Okoli (2011), identifies political accountability as a variant of public accountability. He further suggested that political accountability means that political office holders are accountable and answerable to the people. When this happens, they become the servants and not the masters of

the people. They respond to the yearnings, demands and aspirations of the people, thereby promoting good governance.

A useful perspective from which to approach an understanding of political accountability is the idea of sovereignty. Political philosophers have agreed that sovereignty of the state ultimately lies with the people (Shema, 2004; Osaretin, 2009). The Government as an agent of the state exists as a product of Hobbesian and Lockean social contract to protect and safeguard values universal to the people.

Mcandles (2008), defines political accountability as the “obligation of authorities to explain publicly, fully and fairly before and after the fact, how they are carrying out responsibilities that affect the public in important ways. This view apparently equates accountability to transparency which Omgwu (2006), defines as the openness, guiding or regulating decisions and action of government officials. Accountability requires that those who hold positions of public trust should account for their performance to the public and not to the elite. In that case, there should be a free and fair election where the people decide who governs them at the Local Government, and not imposed on them by the state governors. Arising from the above, they (Local Government Chairmen) become accountable to the Governors and not to the rural populace.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Nwachukwu and Orisuyi (2003) many authors as well as schools of thought have posited that there is no one theory of local government but rather the formulation of any theory on local government will be based on the functions of the aspects being studied. However, different theories of local government that underpins the existence of local Government or that serve as an explanatory framework for the establishment, purpose, function and philosophy of local government have been developed by scholars in the field of Public Administration and Local Government studies. Such include: Democratic-Participatory Theory, Efficiency-Services Theory, Developmental Theory and Elite Theory.

The four theories are relevant in any study of Local Government Administration. However, in this paper attempt is made to examine the elite theory which describes a situation in which power is concentrated in the hands of a limited number of people with special privileges and responsibilities, in the hope that this arrangement will benefit humanity or themselves.

Elites theory's origins lie most clearly in the writings of Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), Robert Michels (1876-1936) and Max Webber (1864-1920). Mosca emphasized the ways in which tiny minorities out-organize and outwit large majorities, adding that “ political classes”, Mosca's term for political elites usually have “a certain material, intellectual, or even moral superiority over those they govern. Ebohon; Obakledo in Idike (2016), opined that the concept of Elite Theory denotes a select group of people with intellect, wealth, influence, power, prestige, authority, education, specialized training or expenses, and other distinctive attributes, who determine the modus operandi on how the society should be ordered.

In the application of Elite Theory to this study, attention will be placed on how the elite have obstructed the course of political accountability in Local Government administration in Nigeria.

### **Contending issues**

Despite the fact that the 1976 local Government Reform was intended to serve as the basis for the operation of an effective and productive Local Government in Nigeria, empirical evidence has shown that accountability and good governance is yet to take its rightful place at the

grassroots level in Nigeria because the constitution establishing them does not allow the rural populace have a control or checks on the elected officials. They are not accountable to the people they are supposed to serve and this no doubt encouraged bad governance. It is therefore correct according to Victor (2009), to say that most of the crises of corruption which is perpetuating poverty at the grassroots level in Nigeria can be traced to constitutional provisions.

For example, the Nigerian constitution gave Local Government a separate status as a third tier of Government, but at the same time subordinates Local government to the state government. With this, whom will the officials be accountable to?

Perhaps, one of the greatest challenges facing Local Government Administration and Political Accountability is the role of the state Governors in the affairs of local Government (Adeyemi, 2013). According to Eboh and Diejomaoh (2010), the Governors have refused to conduct Local Government elections, but instead running Local Government with appointed administrators, most of whom are party loyalist, their friends and relations turning the entire process of Local Governments into irrelevance scheme of things (Ukonga 2012). There have been instances where state governors unconstitutionally dissolve the entire elected council's officers without proper recourse and due process (Eboh and Diejomaoh, 2010). As soon as a new governor comes into office, one of the first actions is to dissolve the existing local councils, whether elected or caretaker (Abutudu, 2011). This, as the case of Imo State demonstrates, can degenerate into anarchy, planting and imposition of political stooges. In many cases, care taker-ship is perpetuated through promises of elections which are invariably postponed. This has been the case in Edo, Delta, Imo, Anambra and others (Abutudu 2011). The outright denial of democratically elected local councils through caretaker committee demonstrates the increasing authoritarian holds of the councils by state governors. As such most state governors never bothered of conducting Local Government election. For instance, as at 2017, Anambra State had not held any council election since the return to civil rule in 1999. Khaled in Adeyemi (2013), agrees with the above that high level of interferences by State Governors on Local Government administration has undermined accountability. He also observed thus:

There is no state of the Federation of Nigeria where one form of illegality or the other is not committed with funds of local government through over deduction of primary school, school teacher's salary, spurious State/Local Government joint account project, sponsoring of election, taking over the statutory function of local Government and handing over to cronies and consultants, non-payments of pensioners and non-utilization of training fund despite the mandatory deduction of stipulated percentages for these purposes ... nine state out of 36 states of the federation have elected representatives running the affairs of their Local Governments. This is central to the whole problem because it is by planting stooges called caretaker committee, who neither have mandate of the people nor the moral strength to resist the excruciating control of the State Governors that perpetuate the rot.

Even when elections are conducted in the local Government Areas, the affected State Governors using the instrumentality of State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIEC) manipulate the entire process and thereby planting their political stooges and loyalists. Examples abound in Ebonyi state, where PDP won in all the Councillorship and Chairmanship elections, so as Akwa Ibom state where the party won all the councillorship and Chairmanship elections. It is the same scenario in every state where the Party in control of the state won all the available elective positions in Local Government elections. Eme (cited in Idike 2016) identifies the undue interference has incapacitated Local Government from effective function and have alienated the grassroots from enjoying service delivery expected of Local

Governments in Nigeria (Agba, Akwara and idu 2013) Consequently, Local Governments now function mostly as an extension or appendages of state government. The inherent nature of this problem according to Adeyemi (2013), has caused subservience, a situation where Local Government waits for the next directive from states government before embarking on any developmental project, if there will be any. This has made Local Government an object of control and directive by state government. The Local Government setting has been responsible for those major crises that have rocked the country since political independence from the way elections were conducted. According to him, the political elite could be endangering democracy if there is no change of attitude. He argued that all the electoral frauds perpetrated in the wider Nigerian political system originated from Local Government level.

Products of this system are not conscious of public accountability, as they owe allegiance to political godfathers and not the electorate, as their votes do not necessarily count. The end point of the foregoing scenario according to Idike (2016), is the dearth of political accountability emanating from a malfunctioning electoral system already entrenched at the Local Government by what Idike (2016) called the ‘treacherous elite’.

### **The way forward:**

Local Government as the closest unit of government to the people at the grassroots is expected to play significant roles in providing social services. Unfortunately this has not been so because of the activities of elites who determine who and how Local Government activities are run, thereby eroding accountability at the grassroots. Consequently, this paper would highlight some measures that would improve Local Government Administration and Political Accountability.

The first measure is Constitutional Reforms to ensure total autonomy of Local Government. These reforms are needed to increase the fiscal and spending autonomy of Local Governments and minimize the interference and control of state governments (Eboh & Diejomoah, 2010). The undue interference of state governors should be eliminated to allow the council heads to govern and manage their natural resources using appropriate planning standards, opportunity to design appropriate policies, programmes and projects suited to peculiar areas, preservation of cultural heritage of communities and effective democratic dividends to the grassroots. Eboh and Diejomoah (2010) cited in Odalonu (2015) asserts that,

Even though the Local Government is commonly referred to as the third-tier of government, it is debatable whether it truly qualifies as a third-tier of government. This is because Local Government does not have the full compliments of a full third-tier of government, like the federal and state governments. There is therefore need for constitutional reforms to provide unique guarantees for autonomy and powers of the Local Government. Alongside, institutional reforms are important to clarify and align Local Government’s roles and responsibilities in a manner that earns public confidence, intergovernmental credibility and unequivocal accountability.

It is in line with this that the national president of Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees(NULGE), Ibrahim Khaleel called on Benue state governor, Samuel Ortom to lead the campaign among his counterparts across the country on the need to grant autonomy to the third-tier of government. The NULGE boss who stated this while on advocacy visit to the governor noted that Local Government autonomy would remove manipulation and unnecessary interference in Local Government and bring development closer to the people. He advocated for a truly democratically elected Local Government Council, direct fund from federal allocation and removal of encroachment of the council’s administration. In his words “what we have now is that there is a disconnection between the people and their leaders but our agitation

is focus on having functional democratic government directly elected by people and for the people”. (Guardian Newspaper)

Corroborating with NULGS boss, Senator Abdullahi Gumel, chairman Senate committee on States and Local Governments in the 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly stated that the benefits that accrue to the establishment of Local Government autonomy are enormous, adding that it would go a long way in bringing government closer to the people and making the people have a say in their own government.(Guardian Newspaper) The chairman blamed state governors for scuttling autonomy efforts to vote in favour of Local Government in the past, probably because of what they stand to gain. He frowned at the continued use of caretaker which is unconstitutional instead of democratically elected chairman as guaranteed by section VII of 1999 constitution as amended. He stressed that Local Government autonomy will attract quality people to the grassroots. He pointed out that, those professionals who had a lot to offer in developing the grassroots are not given the chance by many state governors for their “disloyalty”. Rather what we have are mediocre politicians, accountable to the governors who appointed them. These chairmen according to Gumel only share the pittance they are given by the governors to the people and leave for the city thereby depriving Local Government of the desired rural transformation.

There is the need for the scrapping of the State Independent Electoral Commissions. Their function and powers should be transferred to Independent National Electoral Commission. Many people have expressed dissatisfaction over the performance of SIEC’S which are considered a mere organ of the incumbent State Governors and the ruling parties. Unfortunately, the conduct of Local Government Elections since 2004 till date in many states of the federation tends to support the negative perception of SIECS. In most of the states where Local Government Election was conducted, candidates of the ruling parties won virtually all the seats. Often such results do not reflect the voting pattern in federal elections.

The poor performance of SIEC’S gives cause for concern given the significance of Local Government in a democratic society. The Local Government tier should be the foundation of democratic governance for the citizens. It is the closest level of government to the citizens. Therefore, it should be seen to address the basic needs of the society. Furthermore, it provides citizens with more direct representation and opportunity for political participation. However, in its present form, the operators of the Local Government tier are seen as mere nominee of state Governors who they are accountable to and lack the autonomy to implement popular democratic programmes. It is in view of this, that the 6<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the House of Representative recommended that the existing SIEC should be reorganized and integrated into the structure of INEC for greater efficiency and autonomy. As at now, the only clog hindering the abolition of state Independent electoral Commissions is the fact that by section 9 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) the State Houses of Assembly must also approve proposals aimed at altering the provisions of the Constitution and most State Houses of Assembly if not all are under the firm grip of the Governors. Unless urgent constitutional, legal and institutional reforms are carried out, the days of State Independent Electoral Commission are numbered.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined the contending issues in Local Government Administration and Political Accountability in Nigeria and the way forward. It observed that the hijacking of administration of Local Government by the elites has constituted a threatening force to grassroots developments.

The paper argued that Local Government is no doubt a vehicle for national development. Its importance in providing essential services that have great bearing on national

development cannot be over-emphasized as it has a great bearing on other important sectors of the economy. Therefore, the people should be allowed to decide who govern them through Local Government elections. The political elites across the country should be called to order by the various states' Houses of Assembly through legislations. If this is done, the Local Government Areas will witness tremendous progress. In the process, the relevance of the Local Government Areas in the political system will become enhanced, and political accountability will become entrenched in the political culture of the country.

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