

Residents' Perception of Political Godfatherism and Interference in Governance in Rivers State

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Abstract

This study examined how residents of Rivers State perceived the political godfatherism that played out between immediate past Governor of Rivers State, Nyesom Wike and his successor, Siminalayi Fubara and how the political faux pas interfered in the governance of Rivers State. The objectives of the study were to find out the perception of residents of Rivers State on godfatherism in the governance of Rivers State; ascertain in the perception of Rivers State residents, the extent of interference of political godfatherism in the governance of Rivers State in the case of Nyesom Wike and Siminalayi Fubara, and determine how to curb incessant interference to allow for good governance in Rivers State. The study was anchored on the Elite theory and the perception theory. It adopted the survey research design with a population of 3,537,190 obtained from the Independent National Electoral Commission as registered voters in Rivers State. The sample size of 384 was drawn using the Keyton table. The simple random sampling technique was used as the sample procedure for respondents that cut across 23 LGAs in Rivers State. The questionnaire served as the instrument for data collection. Findings showed that the residents of Rivers State perceived godfatherism as an aberration of democratic values. The residents perceived the extent of interference of godfatherism in the governance of Rivers State as exceedingly high. They agreed that credible electoral systems and citizens' full participation in governance process will to a large extent discourage the emergence of powerful few as godfathers. The researchers recommended that the process of electing a successor during internal primary election of a political party should

be allowed to be a collective decision not by imposition by selected few. There should be proper role definition with mutual understanding between a ruling political party, its elected officers and the different arms of government. All key stakeholders comprising electoral officers, political parties, security agents and the electorate should understand that the democratic system revolves around the wish of the majority of the people. They should not do anything to subvert the wish of the people.

Keywords: *Rivers State residents, Perception, Political godfatherism, Interference, Governance.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the political transition from military to democratic rule which was inaugurated on May 29, 1999, political godfatherism has been the hallmark of Nigerian politics. Emordi, Oshodare and Attah-Echa (2007) recall that in the Second Republic, the leadership of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) under Obafemi Awolowo was deciding the party candidates for elective offices in all the states under its influence, except in Oyo State where Bola Ige (late) emerged through party primaries. At the beginning of the Fourth Republic, the issue of godfathers resurfaced with some party elders always described as kingmakers and political godfathers making decisions of the candidates that will represent the party in various elective positions.

In Kwara State for instance, there was the reign of the Saraki political dynasty. In Anambra State, Emeka Offor was popularly known as the political godfather of Chinwoke Mbadinuju and Chris Uba was the godfather of Chris Ngige. Uba was said to have bankrolled Ngige's ascendancy to office. On assumption of office, Ngige was accused of renegeing on the understanding they had, Thus, the misunderstanding between Chris Uba and Chris Ngige resulted to the alleged abduction of Governor Ngige in Government House. The ordeals Dr Ngige passed through in the hands of his godfather attracted public sympathy and contributed to thrust him into the limelight. The issue of Okija Shrine became popular in Nigerian political history as a result of the feud. In the South West, Lamidi Adedibu was known as godfather to Rasheed Ladoja. Bola Tinubu had so many godsons as a result of his firm grip of Lagos State and some states in the South West.

The issue of godfathers in politics also played out in Rivers State in the Fourth Republic. Rivers State is one of the oil producing states in Nigeria. The state was created in 1967 by the administration of Yakubu Gowon. The state has been governed by different state administrators and governors. It is critical to national growth due to its strategic economic viability to the country.

As a strategic state, top politicians in Rivers State played active role in the formation of the three major political parties in the Fourth Republic. The major political parties that participated in the 1999 general elections had Dr Peter Otunaya Odili as the governorship candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Ebenezer Isokariari for the All Peoples Party (APP) and Eric Aso for the Alliance for Democracy (AD). The Peoples Democratic Party had an influential businessman, Marshal Harry as its Rivers State Party Chairman. He was of the Ijaw bloc and from Kalabari, same tribe with Ebenezer Isokariari. His party won the governorship seat and majority of the

elective positions in Rivers State. Soon after the swearing-in ceremony of the governor on May 29, 1999, Marshal Harry started having issues with the then Governor Peter Otunaya Odili. Harry later left the PDP for APP which was renamed All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). He reportedly swore during an ANPP rally that the then President Olusegun Obasanjo and Peter Odili would not return to power for their second term in office. Marshal Harry was killed in his residence in Abuja on March 5, 2003, just few weeks before the general elections in 2003.

On completion of his second tenure in office, Peter Odili who was a political godfather of Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi assisted his godson to pick the Peoples Democratic Party's governorship ticket in Rivers State. After emerging the party candidate, the national body had issues with the state party and Rotimi Amaechi was denied the party flag until his mandate was reinstated by the Supreme Court in a landmark judgment that the apex has now declared obsolete and ordered never to be cited in jurisprudence again. After Rotimi Amaechi assumed office, he set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission headed by a retired Supreme Court Justice Kayode Eso. The Commission indicted Peter Odili of many wrongs in Rivers State. Peter Odili had to secure a court order to quash his indictment. Thus, the indictment of Peter Odili and other recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did not see the light of the day following the order of the court.

Then, emerged Nyesom Wike who was Chief of Staff to Rotimi Amaechi. Wike was recommended by Rotimi Amaechi to President Goodluck Jonathan for a ministerial appointment. A misunderstanding broke out between Rotimi Amaechi and the then President Goodluck Jonathan. Nyesom Wike cashed in and emerged the governorship candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party. He won the election and was reelected as governor for second term. Nyesom Wike, in different media appearances had vowed never to impose any candidate as his successor. Ironically, he was also captured in the media making confession that he chose Siminalayi Fubara as his successor over his long-time friends and allies.

In October 2023, the majority of members of the Rivers State House of Assembly widely believed to be loyal to Nyesom Wike served an impeachment notice to Governor Fubara. A night before the alleged suspension of the Leader of the House, Edison Ehie, a group of persons set part of the House of Assembly Complex on fire probably to truncate the sitting of the Assembly to suspend the House Leader and then impeach the governor. On his way for an on-the-spot assessment of the fire incident, the Rivers State Governor, Siminalayi Fubara was attacked by security agents who shot sporadically to prevent him from accessing the complex since the Assembly members loyal to Nyesom Wike were sitting to regularise the process of the impeachment. Wike was reported to have accused Fubara of attempting to jettison his structure by hobnobbing with his enemies. The *Premium Times* reported thus: "Mr Wike, after a meeting with some Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) governors in Abuja, accused Mr Fubara of hobnobbing with his political adversaries. "You cannot work, and people will begin to bring enemies; those who fought you when you were struggling for the person to be in office. Nobody does that," Mr Wike, the current minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), was quoted as saying by the News Agency of Nigeria. The former governor, who denied that he was seeking financial gratification from his successor, suggested that Mr Fubara was trying to take control of the PDP structure in Rivers."

Sakede and Ijimakinwa (2016) argue that in democratic setting, the struggle for power among the political elite have advanced into political fights. Edigin (2010) avers that political godfathers are powerful individuals who determine who, what, when and how things operate. They are usually in the corridors of power. “Many godfathers in the present-day Nigeria operate 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*” (Edigin, 2010, p.177).

THE PROBLEM

Political developments point to the fact that Nigerian politics seems to be dominated by godfathers who see politics as a means of survival. They invest their time and resources in the sponsorship and support for candidates who they in turn would exert control over by extorting from the state. They achieve their social and economic interest at the detriment of the growth of the country.

There are several studies on godfatherism in Nigerian politics. For instance, Albert (2005) investigated the menace of godfatherism in Nigerian politics, Emordi, Oshodare and Attah-Echa (2007) studied the complexities of godfatherism in Nigerian politics using the case of Anambra State, Edigin (2010) studied the political conflicts and godfatherism in Nigeria with a focus on the Fourth Republic. Abdullahi and Sakariyau (2013) studied the effects of godfatherism in Nigerian democracy and politics and the way forward. Nwambuko and Omiunu (2024) carried out research on politics of godfatherism and democratic governance in Nigeria using the Rivers State case.

In as much as studies had been carried out on the subject matter and even in Rivers State, none had looked at the perception of residents of Rivers State on the menace of godfatherism in the state. The principles of democracy thrive with the collective will of the majority of people not the will of an individual who imposes his wishes on the people and coerces them into falling in line with his personal opinion.

It is against this backdrop that it has become imperative to investigate the perception of residents of Rivers State on political godfatherism and its effects on the democratic process in the state. Since most African countries practise the crude form of democracy, the outcome of this study will be useful to almost all the states in Nigeria and by extension those African countries.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives are to:

- 1 find out the perception of residents of Rivers State on godfatherism in the governance of Rivers State;
- 2 ascertain in the perception of Rivers State residents, the extent of interference of godfatherism in the governance of Rivers State in the case of Nyesom Wike and Siminalayi Fubara,

- 3 determine in the perception of Rivers State residents, how to curb the incessant political interference of godfatherism to allow for good governance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Elite theory

The assumption of Elite theory is hinged on the fact that in every given society, there must be minority which rules over the rest of the people. Elite theory, according to Mariotti (2020) envisions society as divided between the mass of people and a ruling minority, where the political power, which is the power to take and impose decisions valid to the whole society ironically rests with the minority. It is against the principles of democracy for power to belong to the minority. The Elite theory is said to be initially developed by Italian scholars between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries and it became relevant in political science after World War II. Mariotti posits that from the Elite theory, it is evident that all the forms of government are essentially oligarchies, who use different values and principles to justify the power struggle and to manipulate the consent of the ruled. This theory is relevant to the study because it gives clear understanding of political godfatherism and democratic process.

Perception theory

Perception is a process by which an individual selects, organises, and interprets information inputs to create a meaningful picture of the world. Perception is essential as it explains how people see things, which also means the opinions, views of the people on the subject discussed (Durmaz & Diyarbakirlioglu, 2011). According to Defluer (2010), perception theory has its roots in psychological studies on how human beings process stimuli before responding to them. Psychologists generally agree that selective perception influenced by opinions, attitudes and beliefs offer important explanations to the way individuals behave.

The proponents of this theory are Bernard Berelson and Gary Steiner (1964). The theory has its emphasis on individual variances. The drive of this theory is on how audience members select, organise and interpret data to have a meaningful understanding of the world. Perception explicates why audience attention focuses on messages and the way the audience use the content of the message to effect appropriate changes in attitudes and beliefs. It centres on individual differences. It describes different angles individuals view event, situation, ideas from their own perspective; which more often than not, do not reflect the true state of things. Amodu (2006), citing Luthans (2005), explains that the key to understanding perception is to recognise that it is a unique interpretation of the situation, not an exact recording of it. In short, perception is a very complex cognitive process that yields a unique picture of the world, a picture that may be quite different from reality (p.33).

The perception theory is relevant to this study for seeking to understand the views and opinions of residents of Rivers State on the menace of political godfatherism in their governance.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Concept of Democracy and Political Communication

Democracy is a system of government with origin from Greece. It hinges on collective governance by majority of the people. Abiola and Olaopa (2006) see democracy as a set of institutions that

fulfils certain requirements, the first being that it must elicit as accurately as possible the opinion of many people through their representatives on how the country should be governed. The second requirement is that the institution should provide some way of ensuring that those chosen by the public do what the electorate want them to do. Citing Sargent (1975), Abdullahi and Sakariyau (2013) outline that democracy thrives with citizens involvement in political decision making; some degree of equality among citizens; some degree of liberty, freedom granted or retained by citizenry; a system of representation and an electoral system of majority rule. Abdullahi and Sakariyau note that the basic idea in democracy is that people are essentially equal and that gives each person the right to have a say in the governance process. They add that legitimate political power comes from the people and government therefore, is legal only when the governed consent. On the importance of people having a say in the political process, Udoakah (1998) asserts that political communication becomes imperative as both government and political parties trade on political information. The essence is that the people will be kept abreast of government activities and the candidates which the political parties are promoting for public offices.

Thus, Udoakah (1998) defines political communication as “a process whereby political information is passed on to whom it may concern by those assigned or who assume such responsibility. It may be carried out within political parties or between political parties; it may take place between different political structures; it may be within a bureaucracy; within interest groups, between the government and the citizenry” (p.3).

Tracy (1977) who quoted Lord Windlesham defines political communication as the deliberate passing of a political message by a sender to a receiver with the intention of making the receiver behave in a way that he might have not otherwise have done.

The Concept of Godfatherism

Robin (2010) traces the origin of godfatherism in politics to the city of Chicago in the United States of America in the pre-World War era when the heads of criminal gangs sponsored politicians in elections, manipulated the results to get them elected and in turn received protection and contracts from their political godsons. Chukwuemeka, Oji and Chukwurah (2013) citing Udo (2011) trace the origin of godfatherism in Nigeria to the practice in some Christian dominations where godparents are chosen as surrogates to help biological or adopted parents to raise their children in godly ways. The idea is that the act of raising a child is communal as that would help to infuse all-round discipline and morality in the child. Albert (2005) corroborates the foregoing when he writes that “The word has almost the same meaning in the Catholic Church tradition. A young man trying to become baptised or married in the Catholic Church is expected to have a godfather. The Catholic Church’s godfather is simply chosen from among the larger congregation and need not be a relative to the godson” (p.81).

Albert notes that in France, the term ‘godfather of industry’ is used to depict corporate titans which are businessmen who keep the economy running. He categorises the French godfathers into two types: the first set are those who manipulate the economy for their own benefit, while the second set are crisis fixers, social reformers and popular advocates of the poor.

Political Godfatherism and Democratic Rule in Nigeria

Citing Audu (2006), Abdullahi and Sakariyau (2013) describe political godfathers as people of questionable wealth and influences who rob political parties of their conventional and legitimate

functions of presenting clear and coherent programmes on the basis of which the candidates presented by them are chosen by the voters. Danoye (2004) states that a godfather is a human being who plays god to his people by providing their basic needs, protecting them and assisting them to secure and achieve their objectives. Edigin (2010) sees godfather as a person who sponsors or provides care or support for a person or project, adding that godfather could also mean a person directing an illegal and criminal organisation. Citing Akinola (2009), Edigin explains that a godfather is a kingmaker, boss, mentor and principal, while a godson is the beneficiary and recipient of the legacy of a godfather.

Chukwuemeka et al posit that “the advent of godfatherism in the Nigerian bureaucracy and partisan politics dates back to the First Republic when leaders of the three main political parties: Northern Peoples Congress, Action Group and National Congress of Nigerian Citizens carefully and meticulously cultivated godsons that they were convinced would advance the wellbeing of the citizens” (p.195). Corroborating the foregoing, Igbini and Okolie (2020) observe that the activities of godfathers after the colonial administrations were to raise future leaders for the country. Citing Ugwu, Izueke and Obasi (2013), Igbini and Okolie (2020) aver that the political godfathers of the three major regions of Nigeria produced enormous political godsons in the later political dispensation who occupied various political positions. “...Sir Ahmadu Bello’s political godsons known in Nigeria as the ‘Kaduna Mafia’, the Chief Awolowo’s political godsons known in the South-West as the ‘Afenifere’ (those who wish others well) among whom are Chief Bola Ige, Alhaji Lateef Jakande and Chief Bisi Onabanjo (all former state governors, 1979-1983) and Nnamdi Azikiwe’s political godsons in the Eastern Igbo region of Nigeria like Chief Nwobodo and Chief Sam Mbakwe (both former states)” (p.97). Igbini and Okolie assert that all the godsons of the first-generation patrons later became godfathers in subsequent Nigerian politics. They observe that the politics of godfatherism became widespread in the Nigerian polity from 1999 till date when those in power became the political godfathers in states politics.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the survey research design which is a useful tool to gather relevant data from a large audience which is the population of registered voters in Rivers State. The number of registered voters in Rivers State, according to the figure released by the Independent National Electoral Commission in January 2023 was 3,537,190 (*The Nigerian Tribune*). In order to derive a fair representation of the population size, the study adopted the formula developed by Keyton (2001) to determine the sample size from the population of the study. The table indicated that for a population that is 100,000 and above, the sample size is 384. Therefore, the sample size of this study is 384. Thus, 384 copies of questionnaire were distributed using both google form and hard copies across the 23 local government areas of Rivers State. Out of this number, a total of 371 copies representing 97% response rate were validly returned and formed the data for the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Perception of Rivers State Residents on Godfatherism

Ite m	Nature of response	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TI 371	WMS fx ÷	Decisio n
1	Godfatherism mostly excludes other party members from decision making.	17 3	9 5	55	48	371	3.1	Agreed
2	Godfathers most of the times are dictatorial.	16 4	8 9	43	75	371	2.9	Agreed
3	Most godfathers are after the state resources and not for service and accountability.	19 7	9 5	24	55	371	3.2	Agreed
4	Godfathers always have problems with their godsons due to interference in governance.	22 3	9 9	23	26	371	3.4	Agreed
5	Godfatherism is not in line with democratic values	17 1	9 3	30	77	371	3.0	Agreed
Average weighted mean score						371	3.1	Agreed

Table 1 shows that residents of Rivers State see godfatherism as anti-democratic for not encouraging full participation of the citizens in the political process.

Table 2: Extent of Interference of Godfatherism in Rivers State

Ite m	Nature of response	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TI 371	WMS fx ÷	Decisio n
6	The imposition of Commissioners and even Chief of Staff on the Governor was an interference taken too far.	11 6	9 9	85	71	371	2.7	Agreed
7	The conspiracy leading to the attempt to impeach the Governor on the premise that he was hobnobbing with political enemies is far too much an interference.	19 4	9 6	33	48	371	3.0	Agreed

8	The directive that the Governor should only use the political structure of his predecessor is a high level of interference that is very undemocratic.	20 7	9 5	46	23 371	3.3	Agreed
Average weighted mean score						371 3.0	Agreed

Table 2 shows that residents of Rivers State perceived a very high extent of interference of godfatherism in the governance of Rivers State using the case of ex-Governor Nyesom Wike and his successor, Siminalayi Fubara.

Table 3: How to Curb Interference of Godfatherism in Rivers State

Item	Nature of response	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	TI 371	WMS fx ÷	Decision
9	Credible elections will give more power to the people and discourage godfatherism.	21 3	9 7	32	29 371	3.9	Agreed	
10	Vibrant opposition will help checkmate abuse of power and acts of godfatherism.	24 4	8 9	21	17 371	3.5	Agreed	
11	Citizens' full participation in the political process will checkmate godfatherism.	24 7	9 8	17	9 371	3.6	Agreed	
12	Mass mobilisation and political sensitisation will enlighten the people and curb godfatherism.	23 3	7 9	24	35 371	3.4	Agreed	
13	Proper stewardship and accountability among arms and institutions of government will curb godfatherism in politics.	19 3	9 3	30	55 371	3.1	Agreed	
Average weighted mean score						371 3.5	Agreed	

Table 1 shows that residents of Rivers State see godfatherism as anti-democratic for not encouraging full participation of the citizens in the political process.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research Question One: What is the perception of Rivers State residents on godfatherism in the governance of Rivers State?

Data presented in Table 1 revealed that the perception of residents of Rivers State is that the practice of godfatherism excludes some key political stakeholders from decision making since it is the godfather that takes most decision himself. Such practice, the respondents concede breeds dictatorship. The overwhelming majority agreed that most of godfathers are selfish as their goal is to benefit from the state resources not for service delivery. The respondents see these acts as anti-democratic in practice and nature.

The finding that the practice of godfatherism erodes democratic values and breeds dictatorship reinforces Uduji's (2019) submission that the implication of godfatherism on good governance is the complete erosion of the normative elements of democracy between the government and the governed.

Research Question Two: What in the perception of Rivers State residents, is the extent of interference of godfatherism in the governance of Rivers State in the case of Nyesom Wike and Siminalayi Fubara?

Items 6 to 8 as presented in Table 2 revealed that the perception of residents of Rivers State is that the extent of exercising external control of godfatherism on Governor Siminalayi Fubara by Nyesom Wike is very high. The control manifested in the imposition of members of the State Executive Council on the Governor. The extent of external control of the godfather (Nyesom Wike) was very high in the light of his assertion that his grouse was Governor Siminalayi Fubara now hobnobs with his political enemies and also tampers with his (Wike's) political structure.

The findings support Ndubuisi's (2011) position who argues that the high level of political interference in government had continued to create political instability in Enugu State as a result of activities of godfatherism.

Research Question Three: In what ways will the incessant political interference of godfatherism be curbed to allow for good governance of Rivers State?

Data presented in Table 3 outlined some factors necessary to checkmate the political interference of godfatherism in the governance of Rivers State. Respondents agree that credible elections, vibrant opposition to checkmate the excesses of public figures and the massive participation of citizens in the political process would help to curb political interference of godfatherism in the governance of the state.

Other factors that could curb political interference, according to the respondents are: mass mobilisation and enlightenment campaigns, political sensitisation and proper stewardship among the organs and institutions of government.

These findings agree with the submission of Igbini and Okolie (2020) that credible elections, liberal democracy and purposeful leadership are part of the key factors that are needed to checkmate the rise of godfatherism in politics.

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