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State Capture and Elective Dictatorship in Nigeria's Democratic Space: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Nigeria has run democratic governance consecutively for twenty-one years. Within this timeframe, democracy has demonstrated signs of maturation and consolidation. Nigeria has witnessed administration-to-administration and party-to-party transitions. However, the political system tends to lack certain fundamental political culture, especially the entrenchment of the supremacy of institutions rather than personalities. The key question that this paper interrogates is the extent to which the democratic ethos of elective principles and institutional independence have been entrenched. Adjunct to this question is whether state capture by political elites through elective dictatorship has compromised Nigeria's democratic space in terms of circumventing people's electoral powers. The paper finds that democratic processes have been short-

changed through the instrumentality of elective dictatorship. It also finds that the primacy of the electorate as the motorising force of democratization has been undermined. It recommends political inclusiveness through the modification of the electoral system to confer primacy on elective principles.

Keywords: *Democratic governance, elective dictatorship, Nigeria, political elites, state capture*

1. Introduction

Nigeria's current democratic system, which started in 1999 has crossed the Rubicon of administration-to-administration and party-to-party transitions, which is an indication that democracy is maturing in the country. However, there is still a threat to democratic governance in Nigeria. The threat is in the form of what scholars have variously termed pseudo-authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism and electoral autocracy (Schedler, 2013;2015; Lührmann & Lindberg,2019). Electoral authoritarianism or autocracy exists where formal democratic institutions are in place but are manipulated by political elites and incumbents in order to gain a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents in electoral competitions (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Letsa,2019). A major factor that has given leverage to the ascendancy of electoral authoritarianism in Nigeria is what Van de Walle (2003,p.304)has termed "programmatic homogeneity" in the manifestoes of registered political parties.

The notion of programmatic homogeneity in Nigeria's political system connotes lack of distinctiveness among political parties. There are no distinguishable ideological identities among parties in Nigeria's party system (Omotola, 2009). This lack of unique ideological identity has been a contributory factor to the perennial registration and deregistration of political parties in Nigeria (Nwozor, Audu, Ake, Olanrewaju & Ogundele, 2019). Scholars have emphasized the importance of ideology in party politics, especially as a means to aggregating and mobilising voters (Nnoli, 2003; Omotola,2009). Nnoli (2003, p. 177) sums up the centrality of ideology as a driving force of politics when he asserts, "there can be no politics without ideology, and no ideology without politics ". Yet, no major political party in Nigeria is distinguishable from others on account of its ideological uniqueness (Nwozor et al., 2019). A major reason for this trend is located in the

manner in which Nigerian political elites perceive the state, party system and the instrumentality of parties in democratic settings. The state is seen as a source of wealth. Hence, access to state wealth is through political power, which is obtained through the instrumentality of political parties (Amuwo, 2013; Aiyede, 2013). Therefore, in the desperation of political elites to access state wealth, ideology plays insignificant role in party formation and elite aggregation (Nwozor et al.,2019).

In Nigeria, the control of the party machinery provides the means by which the state is captured. This explains the constant intra-party squabbles, the regularity of party switching, and the unending streams of applications for the registration of new political parties. The control of the party machinery confers enormous powers on political elites leading to elite dictatorship. Elite control is perfected through elective dictatorship. By elective dictatorship, we mean the manipulation of the electoral process to install certain preferred candidates to the detriment of the cardinal principle of freeness and fairness. There is a reinforcing relationship between state capture and elective dictatorship. In other words, without the power to predetermine and impose party candidates, gaining access to state wealth will be impossible for the elites. Thus, elective dictatorship produces a government that is not naturally a product of the people and thus not really pro-people.

This paper broadly examines the reinforcing interconnections between state capture and elective dictatorship within the context of Nigeria's democratic space. The key question specifically examined by this paper is the extent to which the electoral processes and party independence have or have not been undermined through elective dictatorship. Corollary to this question is how elective dictatorship has furthered state capture in terms of eroding and compromising democratic ethos and alienating the people in the country's democratization process. The paper contends that political elites covet state power in furtherance of their parochial interests. In line with the quest to capture state power, they manipulate the electoral process through the instrumentality of elective dictatorship both at the level of political parties and at the multiparty polls and thus undermine democratization in Nigeria.

2. Conceptual Explication/Theoretical Underpinning

2.1. Conceptual Explication

The question of political leadership has been in the front burner of Nigeria's national discourse since its independence. A major factor in Nigeria's leadership question is the long years of unaccountable government. This did not afford the country the opportunity to create the frameworks for leadership recruitment, training and succession. Leadership as a concept has the quality of wide applicability in diverse fields (Gberevbie, Joshua, Excellence-Oluye & Oyeyemi, 2017). Notwithstanding the scholarly disputations concerning the definitional boundaries of leadership, this paper conceptualises political leadership as a politico-social construct that denotes aspiration and accomplishment of state objectives. Political leadership mirrors the mechanism for incubating and catalysing positive state aspirations. It also encompasses structures and roles, that is, the various offices through which leadership is expressed, the individuals that occupy these offices and the set of requisite tasks they perform (Balogun, 1997). Political leaders are therefore driven by the aspiration to create a conducive socioeconomic and political environment for the majority of the people to realise their expectations.

The concept of personality cult has received diverse interpretations in the literature (Pisch, 2016). Although there is no agreement as to its first usage, some scholars have linked its popularisation to Nikita Khrushchev. In the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union in 1956, Khrushchev had used personality cult to denounce the consolidation of Stalin's personal dictatorship (Lu & Soboleva, 2014; Pisch, 2016). Since then, the concept has undergone various interpretations. In modern politics, the concept has continued to undergo refinement. Lu and Soboleva (2014) see it as a practice found in nondemocratic regimes, which promotes an idealised image of a leader in order to generate personal worship. Paltiel (1983) conceptualises personality cult from the prism of communism. Thus, personality cult refers to the establishment of a fountainhead of authority over a political system through the entrenchment of personal authority as against the institutionalised authority of the party (Paltiel, 1983). In line with the foregoing, Hunter (2012) defines it as the acceptance of absolute personal authority over and above established institutional **state** authority. A nuanced

definitional adaptation of personality cult in this paper conceptualises it as the exclusive group of political elites that controls the affairs of the parties or the state. The cult constitutes the dominant coalition within the ruling class and pursues parochial interests that advance its politico-economic ascendancy within the polity.

State capture is designated a form of corruption because of its distortionary influence on policy formulation and tendency to influence laws and regulations for the benefit of some vested interests (Hellman, Jones & Kaufmann, 2003; Myburgh, 2017; February, 2019). State capture happens when small groups of well-resourced individuals and entities take control and shape the political rules to their advantage. State capture is catalysed by rent-seeking behaviour aimed at taking advantage of the state (Hellman, Jones & Kaufmann, 2003; Myburgh, 2017). Thus, for any group of elites to capture the state, they must necessarily be in control of state power. It is access to, and control of state power that positions and empowers the political elites to facilitate the manipulation of policy formulation and implementation. State capture therefore makes it possible for privileged benefits from government to percolate to designated beneficiaries with links to dominant political elites.

State capture is facilitated by elective dictatorship. Elective dictatorship is entrenched through the instrumentality of godfather and personality cult. Notwithstanding the variations in the rendering of the concept of elective dictatorship (Aldons, 2002), we conceive it in terms of the manipulation of the electoral process resulting in the ascendance and dominance of a political clique within political parties and in the polity as a whole. It also connotes the circumscription of the elective principle anchored on the twin-notion of contestation and participation in the electoral process.

2.2. Theoretical Underpinning

This paper adopts political clientelist theory or political clientelism to illuminate the patterns of manipulation and privatization of party structures by political elites to capture state power. The control of state power is indispensable in gaining access to state wealth. Clientelist strategies are therefore deployed to capture the state, both for its power and wealth. In its classical sense, clientelism denotes "a long-lasting and dyadic face-to-face relationship of exchange between a patron and a client" (Tomsa & Ufen, 2013, p. 4). Clientelism has been made versatile

and now takes up several forms. It encompasses not just personalised relationships between a patron and a client but also some version of broker-driven network or broker-mediated distributive system that is characterised by anonymous relations (Tomsa, 2013; Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno & Brusco, 2013).

Clientelism deploys such strategies as patronage, vote buying, bribery and outright intimidation to maintain clientelistic relationships (Stokes, 2013). These strategies result in building a framework or network that facilitates and nurtures "reciprocity, voluntarism, exploitation, domination and asymmetry" (Tomsa & Ufen, 2013, p.5). The clientelist network rewards the patron with proxy power that ensures access to state control in various forms. As has been observed by Grzymala-Busse (2008, p. 638-9), "clientelism consists of the contingent and targeted distribution of selective goods to supporters in exchange for their loyalty. These exchanges give clientelist organisations a strong advantage in political competition".

The Nigerian political system is characterised by clientelist network (Balogun, 1997; Omobowale & Olutayo, 2010), which is oriented towards the acquisition of state power by political elites. It is this quest for the acquisition and control of state power, whether directly or by proxy, that spawns elective dictatorship. The political elites routinely subvert the democratic ethos of elective principle by imposing candidates on the electorates. This is so because the possession and control of state power is considered politically gratifying and economically rewarding by the elites (Fasakin, 2015). Thus, in place of strong institutions, which are required to drive democracy, clientelism has created and sustained strong men. These strong men, known as political godfathers, erect a maze of networks that feeds and sustains the control of political power through corrupt means. This is so because clientelistic exchanges essentially require godfather-patrons to provide private goods to their clients. Basically, they control the party machinery. It is through this control that they manipulate the electoral process to the advantage of their protégés. This creates a symbiotic relationship that ensures they are well positioned to capture the state. The manipulation is facilitated by their wide connections and capacity to pay off opposition to their clientelistic network. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2012) attribute the leverage of godfather-patrons to low levels of national development and attendant high poverty among voters. This

makes it easy and cheap to broker distributions among the relevant sections of the political system.

The capture of the state makes it possible for political elites to manipulate policy formulation and shape policy outcomes to favour them and their acolytes. As has been observed by Anciano (2017), clientelism tends to challenge the neo-liberal logic of the state and aspires to subordinate the masses to the political elites. The straddling influence of clientelistic network is evident in Nigeria's political system. Clientelism motorises electoral dictatorship both in intra and inter party electoral contests. The primary elections of the two major political parties in Nigeria have always been characterised by widespread litigations. The outcomes of such primary elections have never reflected the wishes of party members (Nwozor et al., 2019). The outcomes mirror the wishes of the dominant political elites that control the clientelistic networks.¹

3. Methodology

The data for this paper were generated from both primary and secondary sources. The paper adopted key informant interview (KII) method to generate its primary data. A total of 12 key informants were purposively selected based on the criteria of their established knowledge of Nigeria's democratic experience, and their capacity for analytical assessment of various areas of Nigeria's democratic development. The key informants were drawn from the academia, civil society organisations (CSOs) and politically active groups, including political parties. Specifically, four persons were drawn from the universities, five from political parties, two from CSOs and one public affairs analyst (Table 1). The key informants were interviewed through the instrumentality of semi-structured questions. This provided ample room for follow-up questions. The identities of our key informants have been anonymized in accordance with our previously agreed arrangement. Additionally, the paper complemented the data generated from the key informants with robust data from diverse archival sources. The data generated from both sources were qualitatively analysed through logical inductive method.

4. Findings/Discussion

The key informants were interviewed broadly on the reinforcing interconnections between state capture and elective dictatorship within the context of Nigeria's democratic system. Semi-structured set of interview questions constituted the data-gathering instrument. Semi-structured interview format was employed to provide room for the key informants to have a wide latitude for the expatiation of their views where necessary. It was also used to ensure both comparability of data and room for elaboration considering the diversity of the key informants in terms of their knowledge-base, personal and professional experience. Thematic analysis identified and validated four major themes that captured all the data from the interviews. The four themes included political leadership challenges, godfather syndrome in Nigerian politics, party formation and governance, and democratization and anti-democratic culture (Figure 1). Tables 2 and 3 contain the sample questions and the overview of findings respectively.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants in key informant interviews

Key Informant ID	Sex	Occupation/professional affiliation
KI-1	M	Senior academic in a public university in north-central Nigeria.
KI-2	M	Senior academic in a public university in southwest Nigeria.
KI-3	M	Mid-level academic in a private university in southwest Nigeria.
KI-4	F	Mid-career Administrative Officer in a private university in north-central Nigeria.
KI-5	M	National-level stakeholder in All Progressives Congress (APC).
KI-6	M	State-level stakeholder in APC.
KI-7	M	State-level stakeholder in People's Democratic Party (PDP).
KI-8	F	Woman leader of a minority opposition party.
KI-9	M	State youth leader of a minority party in southeast Nigeria.
KI-10	F	Political education coordinator of a nongovernmental organisation based in Abuja.
KI-11	F	Programme officer of a community-based non-governmental organisation
KI-12	M	Public affairs analyst

Table 2. Interview questions with room for elaboration

Theme	Lead Questions
Political leadership challenges	What would you think motivates politicians to aspire to leadership position in Nigeria? Do you think there is a level-playing ground for leadership ascendancy in Nigeria?
Godfather syndrome	Is godfather syndrome relevant in democracy? Has godfather syndrome promoted or undermined elective principles in Nigerian democracy?
Party formation and governance	Are political parties in Nigeria people-driven? That is, do members contribute to policy formulation and implementation? How would you describe the operational modalities of political parties? Are political parties mass-driven or elite-driven in terms of processes for the emergence of party policies?
Democratization and anti-democratic culture	Do you think democracy is taking real roots in Nigeria? Are there identifiable anti-democratic practices that stand as dangers to democratization and democratic consolidation?

4.1. Political Leadership Challenges

Political leadership embraces the totality of the membership of the political class. It consists of those elected, appointed or co-opted into the class. Political leaders possess the exclusive privilege of contributing to the operations of the government whether directly or indirectly (Ogbeidi, 2012). Political leadership is the motorising force of social contract as it exercises the power of the state in the quest to actualise the aspirations of the citizens. The theoretical basis of social contract is the voluntary cession of freedoms and liberties by citizens to a central authority. This central authority performs the moderating functions that secure and strengthen the state. Thus, the state is a creation of the citizens and its essence is to accomplish their collective purposes, especially to safeguard life and liberty of the individual and ensure the "greatest good of the greatest number" (Igwe, 2001, p.402).

In responding to what motivates aspiration to leadership position in Nigeria, the key informants variously ascribed space to "ambition", "quest to access state wealth", "power-for-power's-sake" and "glamour associated with power". The consensus view of our key informants is that the mind-set of the Nigerian political elite in relation to leadership is patently negative. Political elites tend to perceive leadership narrowly;

mainly in terms of its utilitarian value in furthering the economic interest of the dominant class.

The key informants agreed that Nigeria still contends with leadership challenges despite transiting to democratic governance. There is a consensus among the key informants that leadership challenge in Nigeria is deep-rooted and traceable to the long years of unaccountable government. KI-1 contended that authoritarian rule in Nigeria fostered the psyche of "might is right" among Nigerian leaders. This position resonates the contention of Achebe (1984, p. 1) that "the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to their responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership."

In addition, the key informants pointed out that the failure of leadership in Nigeria is cumulative and therefore requires a definite restorative plan. The current challenge is the absence of a level-playing ground for leadership ascendancy in Nigeria. Several factors were mentioned by the key informants as contributing to, and reinforcing the unevenness of the terrain for leadership ascendancy in Nigeria. The factors listed were the hijack of party machinery by political godfathers, both directly and by proxy; monetisation of politics, which excludes and handicaps aspirants without secure financial base; non-recognition of independent candidacy; pervasive poverty; and illiteracy. The last two factors provide fodder for money politics.

Figure 1. Thematic areas of focus

Table 3. Overview of findings

Theme	Summary of key informants' views
Political leadership	Leadership problem is still persistent in the country. No discernible framework for leadership grooming and succession has been established. There is a disconnect between emergent leaders and people's choices due to the circumvention of electoral principles and processes.
Godfather syndrome	Godfather syndrome has eroded elective principles through the imposition of candidates. Godfathers deploy intimidation and other underhand methods to produce party candidates. Godfather syndrome facilitates the emergence of personality cult.
Party formation and governance	Unwieldy number of political parties is unhealthy for democratic consolidation as it makes it difficult to forge a united opposition bloc. There is a high prevalence of party switching. This underpins the ideological barrenness in the polity Party system thrives on big donations from godfathers and their associates rather than membership dues. This is a major constraint to people-driven, bottom-up policy-making and implementation approach.
Democratization and anti-democratic culture	Electoral Acts since 2002 represent reforms aimed at entrenching democracy in the country. However, the implementation of Electoral Acts still has huge gaps.

The non-regulation of party financing places fringe parties at a disadvantage and has negative impact on their electoral performance.

4.2. *Godfather Syndrome*

The nature of party formation in 1998 when Nigeria returned to democratic rule created a dichotomy in the membership structure of party system. The membership structure of the then emergent political parties was dichotomised into "founders" and "joiners". The key motivation for the founders was to wrest power from the military (Kura,2011).These founders financed the parties and transformed themselves to godfathers. Thus, rather than political parties playing the role of aggregating the diverse interests of their memberships, they became structures for clientelistic politics (Van de Walle, 2003).

The key informants generally opined that the godfather syndrome in Nigerian politics is an anomaly and therefore detrimental to democratization. KI-10 noted that the perennial low turnout of voters in the six multiparty general elections held in Nigeria so far is directly linked to the interference by godfathers in the intra and inter party electoral processes. In the same vein, KI-12 opined that the havoc done to Nigeria's democratization effort is evident in the deluge of litigations pending in courts. These litigations were mainly in connection with party primaries. These observations are in line with the trends in Nigeria's political arena. Evidence suggests that since 1999, all the general elections and party conventions attracted floods of litigations from aggrieved aspirants and party members (Omenma, Ibeanu & Onyishi,2017). In the run up to the 2011 general elections over 150 litigations,which had been instituted by aggrieved politicians were pending in courts (Agande, 2011). Similarly, prior to the 2019 general elections, it was reported that over 1,689 litigations connected with party primaries were pending in courts (Punch, 2019).

There is a consensus among key informants that the godfather syndrome has undermined democratization in Nigeria. It was held to be responsible for the perennial struggle for power that characterises political parties. KI-7 argued that this intra-elite struggle led to the creation of pockets of power blocs, which entrenched internal tensions and created personality cults across the parties.

4.3. Party Formation and Governance

Nigeria's political terrain is filled with political parties of different electoral strengths. However, the dominant political parties are the APC and PDP. The question posed to the key informants was whether political parties are people-driven in terms of members playing key role in policy formulation and implementation. The position of the key informants was that godfathers and their cult followerships in political parties have contracted the space for mass participation in party activities, including policy formulation and implementation.

The party system is quite volatile due to a combination of high turnover in defections and multiplicity of parties. The number of political parties in Nigeria has kept changing. New parties joined the political race in every general election since 1999. For instance, from three political parties that contested the 1999 general elections, the number rose to 50 parties in 2007 (NDI, 2008). During the 2011 general elections, 63 political parties participated. The number jumped to 91 parties by 2019. In the same vein, the number of parties that presented candidates for the office of the president in 2011 was 24. By 2019, 73 parties contested the presidential election (Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, 2019).

The key informants noted that the structure of the party system in Nigeria does not appear to provide the latitude for mass participation in policymaking and implementation. The major reason is the capital-intensive nature of running political parties. KI-4 noted that no political party in Nigeria raises its operational funds from the traditional sources of party financing such as membership dues, sale of souvenirs, sale of party emblems and the like. Funds for administering the parties normally come from generous donations from the godfathers and their associates.

The key informants described the operational modalities of political parties as elite-dominated and elite-driven. KI-8 contended that a major evidence of elite domination was the abandonment of direct primaries as a means for choosing party candidates. She averred that the adoption of delegate system was in itself an elite-driven policy as it excluded the mass of party membership from exercising their franchise. Thus, none of the candidates chosen by parties to contest on their platforms actually emerged through the voting preferences of the masses.

4.4.Democratization and Anti-democratic Culture

None of the six general elections held in Nigeria since 1999 was accepted by contesting candidates as free and fair or meeting the minimum standard of credibility (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010; Bamgbose, 2012; Akinsanya, 2015; Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, 2019). The widespread negative sentiments expressed by civil society organisations and the international community against the 2007 election extracted a commitment from the late Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's government to reform the electoral system. The question is whether these reforms have led to democracy taking deep roots in Nigerian polity.

The key informants held the view that democratization is on course in Nigeria, although not at the expected pace. KI-11 pointed out that the series of reforms in the form of Electoral Acts since 2002 were indications of progress towards entrenching democracy. However, despite the provisions of the Electoral Acts, elections were still characterised by anomalies resulting in violence and litigations (Agbu, 2016; Nwozor & Oshewolo, 2017).

Essentially, elections are part of the fundamental principles that confer democratic status on a political system. As Huntington (1991, p.9) emphatically avers, "...elections, open, free, and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non". Therefore, the operative parameters for determining whether an election has fulfilled the minimum benchmark of acceptability are the attributes of "open, free and fair". Our key informants were asked about identifiable anti-democratic practices that stand as dangers to democratization and democratic consolidation. They identified several forces that undermine democratization in Nigeria.

The first factor identified by the key informants was elective dictatorship. It manifests in non-adherence to, and circumvention of the electoral guidelines both within the party and in the general elections. The key informants pointed out that what seemed to be sustaining elective dictatorship is the lack of political will on the part of relevant government agencies, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), to implement the provisions of the relevant Electoral Acts.

The second factor pointed out was the monetisation of the electoral process. Political party financing has been a major issue of concern.

Scholars have pointed out the connection between party financing and the credibility of the electoral process. Walecki (2004, p. 24) has observed that "unregulated political financing presents specific problems for modern liberal democracies in that it fails to provide a framework in which candidates and political parties can compete on equal terms". K1-9 averred that the relevant government agencies have so far failed to invoke the relevant provisions of the Electoral Act to regulate party financing. The key informants generally believed that the non-regulation of party financing placed so many parties at a disadvantage and affected their electoral fortunes in previous general elections in Nigeria.

The third factor was the subversion of intra-party democratic principles. Ojukwu and Olaifa (2011) have noted that intraparty democratic practices constitute the bedrock of democracy. All the key informants expressed the view that the trend in political parties tended towards being nondemocratic in choosing their candidates. Almost all the political parties tended to deploy three strategies to alter the political playing ground. These included zoning elective offices based on predetermined interests of the members of the dominant personality cults in the parties; the prohibitive cost of nomination forms and the indiscriminate substitution of names of party candidates after primaries.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The crisis in the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria is rooted in a multiplicity of factors, ranging from the manipulation of the electoral process to the institutionalisation of personality cults and the exclusion of the masses. Democracy is so-called because of the centrality of the people in making choices among contenders for political positions. The continued relevance of political godfather syndrome is rooted in the unwillingness of relevant government agencies to implement the law. The extant 2010 Electoral Act (as amended) provided an escape route for the godfathers. For instance, only political parties and not candidates are required to submit audited statements of election -parties are barred from receiving donations from abroad, candidates are expenses within six months of an election to INEC. In addition, while not barred (NDI, 2012).

The trajectory of Nigeria's democratization efforts appears to discount and alienate the people as the driving force of democracy. What needs to be done is to bring back the people into the epicentre of

democratic practice by modifying the electoral system to prevent the undue influence of the personality cults that throw up the godfathers. The Electoral Act should be updated to close the gaps that tend to undermine democratization in Nigeria.

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