

Democracy, Godfatherism And The Problem Of Accountability And Responsible Leadership In Nigeria

Ejikeme Jombo Nwagwu

Abstract

This paper examines the notions of ‘democracy’, ‘godfatherism’, and ‘leadership’ with a view to determining the extent to which the phenomenon of godfatherism impacts on leadership and leadership style in a democracy such as Nigeria. It establishes that there is a direct relationship between responsible leadership and accountability, but goes on to argue that the abuse and wrong deployment of the phenomenon of godfatherism by the key political players in Nigeria have made nonsense of the democratic and leadership values of responsibility and accountability. This development, the paper argues, has resulted in lack of both human and infrastructural development, even as most political office-holders no longer see themselves as holding their offices in trust for the people, but rather in trust for their godfathers, themselves and their relations. Having run an extensive exposition and analysis of what genuine democracy and responsible leadership are and what they stand for, it goes on to submit that Nigeria is only practicing the opposite of these concepts. Whereas it does not condemn the phenomenon of godfatherism in its entirety, the paper, however, contends that it has been grossly abused and misapplied by the Nigerian political class. On this note, it advises the so-called political elites in Nigeria to look the way of the advanced countries and borrow from them the best way to deploy the apparatus of godfatherism in both political and other strands of leadership. It harps on the importance of meritocracy, freedom of choice, consensus/majority opinion and accountability, as some of the imperatives upon which a responsible democratic leadership thrives. Accordingly, it recommends urgent re-orientation of the political class on the real import of these values and the need for them to imbibe and dramatize them in their political and leadership activities, warning that unless this step is taken, all our efforts at advancing Nigeria socio-politico-economically will continue to be an absolute exercise in futility.

Introduction

Democracy, as a political process, affords the electorates the opportunity to participate in playing the role of electing their representatives in government. Democracy is a political system in which the supreme power lies in a body of citizens who can elect people to represent them in government. It is a doctrine that the numerical majority of an organized group can make decisions binding on the whole group known as majority rule. Democracy

consists of four basic elements, namely, it is a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; it involves the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; it also entails protection of the human rights of all citizens; and a rule of law in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens. It is a process that affords the great mass of the population the opportunity to exercise effective influence in decision-making processes that make up the work of government. Nwabueze (1992) (cited in Okoye (2007:2) defines democracy as a form of government which recognizes, and indeed institutionalizes, the people as the fountain of power, and enables them, by means of elections at frequent intervals on a universal adult franchise, to choose and mandate those to govern, a form of government in which the public good or the welfare of the people is the object.

Democracy is a means for the people to choose their leaders and to hold their leaders accountable for their policies and their conduct in office. The people decide who will represent them in parliament, and who will head the government at the national, states, and local council's levels. They exercise this power by choosing between competing candidates from various political parties in regular, free and fair elections. This means that government is based on the consent of the governed; the people are sovereign, the highest form of political authority; power flows from the people to the leaders of government, who hold power only temporarily for the electorates. The laws and policies require majority support in parliament, but the rights of minorities are protected in various ways (see: wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn). It is El-Rufai's (2003:16) view that the central concern of liberal democracy is to provide the framework for the aggregation of long-term interest of the majority and the channelling of public resources in the pursuit of that interest. However, where corruption by the custodians of the aggregate interest exist and persists, the chances are that development targets will be missed and the Hobessian society would emerge. Consequently, societies that have adhered to minimum liberal democratic principles have raised guaranteed living standards by observing and complying with simple rules, which include private sector led growth, macro-economic stability and fiscal discipline, investment promotion, deregulation of financial markets and anti-corruption measures, especially when these are backed by a stable and predictable judicial system and internal security.

This paper therefore construes democracy along the lines of its basic features – popular participation in the decision-making process, open and fair competition within firmly and generally accepted rules of the game and a normative dimension that consists of the acceptance of majority rule, respect for the rule of law, protection of individual and majority rights, and safeguarding the interests of the disadvantaged groups (Mimiko, 1995:1, cited in Adeyemi, 2006:43). Theoretically, democracy appears to be the need impetus for the triumph of “free and fair election”. However, in reality, the principles of free and fair election exhibit less democratic qualities in developing countries, especially when its implementation is devoid of good governance as it is prevalent in Nigeria. Thus, the organizing principles of democracy and the concept of free and fair election can be in conflict if those responsible for the implementation of the latter manipulate it to their own favour. The Nigeria polity presents a situation where the welfare of the citizens is grossly mortgaged for the interests of a few politicians and their mentors (godfathers). The thrust of this paper is to examine the notions of democracy and the impacts of godfatherism on leadership style in Nigeria.

Rights Of Voters

In democracy, the people are free to criticize their elected leaders and representatives, and to observe how they conduct the business of government. The elected representatives, on the other hand, should listen to the people and respond to their needs and suggestions. As a routine, elections have to occur at regular intervals as prescribed by law. Constitutionally, those in power cannot arbitrarily extend their tenure in office without asking for the consent of the people a second time through subsisting electoral processes. In order to guarantee free and fair election, the administration of elections has to be executed by a neutral, unbiased, fair and objective professional body that must treat all political parties, candidates and the electorates equally. In that context, all parties and candidates must have the right to campaign freely, to present their manifestoes to the voters either directly or through the mass media or application of both methods; and protection of the lives of the electorates is guaranteed (no intimidation, harassment, no physical assault or molestation of any sort by political thugs or law enforcement agents) during political rallies. Furthermore, voters must be able to vote in secret, devoid of intimidation and violence.

There must be freedom for independent observers to observe the voting and the vote counting procedures to ensure that the process is free of corruption and fraud. Impartial and independent tribunals would be institutionalized to resolve any disputes about the election results. These processes involve lots of time, human (knowledgeable experts) and material resources to organize a good, free and fair elections. Generally speaking, any democratic country can hold elections; but for an election to be free and fair, it requires a lot of organization, preparation, and training of political parties, electoral officials, and civil society organizations whose responsibility is to monitor the electoral processes. All these variables are harmonized into an aggregate by experienced leader who control and coordinate all activities of the group. No group, community or society can experience good governance without good leadership (see: www.stanford.edu/~ldiamond/...WhalsDemocracy012004.htm).

Responsible Leadership

A situation where new family emerge, or in a community where activities of others need to be coordinated to achieve meaningful and desired purposes, or in an organization where organizational goals are preset to be achieved, a leader must be in-charge of harnessing human and material resources to achieve the pre-determined objectives. A leader does not lead himself. Rather, he must have followers who obey and emulate him in doing all the things the leader wants them to do. Leadership is defined as influencing others to do what the leader wants them to do. We have autocratic, participative, democratic and laissez-faire leadership. An autocratic leader is a person who tells subordinates what to do and expects to be obeyed without question; a participative leader is a person who involves subordinates in decision making but may retain the final authority; a democratic leader is a person who tries to do what the majority of subordinates desire; while the laissez-faire leader is a person who is involved in the work of the Unit (Mondy, Sharplin and Premeaux, 1990:102). There is a sharp distinction between leadership and management. Leadership focuses on human interactions, "influencing others", while management is more concerned with procedure and results, "the process of getting things done". The concept "manager" often refers to a position in an organization. On the other hand, a leader may have no formal title at all and

rely on personal traits and style to influence followers. There are many things that determine if a leader will be good or not, the most important being his/her characteristics. Some of the characteristics of a good leader are acquired through leadership training, development and experience while the others are in born. Those leaders who have in-born traits of good leadership are usually the ones who assert successful leadership. It is always easier if effective leadership comes naturally to someone. Since there are so many leadership roles that they are expected to carry out, it is essential for them to display, if not all, at least a few characteristics of good leaders. This is where the trait approach to leadership comes to bare. The trait approach to leadership is the evaluation and selection of leaders based on their physical, mental, and psychological characteristics.

Characteristics Of A Good Leader

The basic traits of a good leader remain common features, whether it is team leadership, corporate leadership or global leadership. Characteristics of a good leader include the following attributes:

- **Self Leadership:** This is probably the most important characteristic of a good leader. It asserts that only when a leader leads himself towards excellence, will he be able to lead his followers on the same path.
- **Personal Leadership:** This is commonly observed in good leaders. Personal leadership enables them to take charge of their lives and instil the same desire in their followers. It is a motivational leadership trait that all leaders must have or strive to acquire.
- **Confidence:** Believing in their own abilities is an essential trait of a good leader. Unless and until he has confidence in his abilities he will not be able to lead effectively.
- **Character:** A leader's character plays a vital role in determining the effectiveness of his leadership. Trustworthiness and honesty are the two important aspects of a leader's character. Even a slight flaw in his character will lead to the followers, not believing in his ways. Therefore, he should follow all the set leadership principles. As a leader, you must be technically proficient. You must know your job and have a solid familiarity with your people's needs and aspirations. A leader should be a role model for his followers not otherwise.
- **Communication:** Effective communication is a vital leadership trait of a good leader. A good leader should be able to put across what needs to be done and how it should be done. At the same time, he should be willing to accept relevant suggestions from his subordinates. He should have the ability to listen, question, analyze and observe effectively. A good leader should believe that actions speak louder than words.
- **Knowledge:** Being highly knowledgeable and skilful about his field of work is an essential characteristic of a good leader. Only when a leader himself is thorough with his field of work will he be able to guide, solve problems and queries and train his subordinates appropriately. Using good problem solving, decision making, and planning tools to make sound and timely decisions is also a quality required for leadership development. He must know his strengths and weakness
- **Respect:** A good leader does not demand or command respect, he earns it. Respect should not be restricted only from the followers to the leader, it needs to be mutual.

All team players should be respected and if the leader sets an example for this, the team will follow undoubtedly. This could be a vital characteristic of a strong leader.

- **Vision:** Being a good leader requires that the person would be able to think, considering the future and giving it equal importance as the present. A good leader should be able to successfully convince his followers and make them understand the need for change which will ultimately result in the achievement of their common goals.
- **Attitude:** Sporting, a positive attitude, even in the worst of situations, is a characteristic of a good leader. A good leader should be able to instil the same spirit of sportsmanship in his followers by appropriate motivation and problem solving techniques. The attitude of a leader is an important determinant in the successful overcoming of leadership challenges.
- **Strategic Leadership:** This is an important aspect of leadership skills. This includes planning and organizing of team activities, allotment of tasks and responsibilities, effective time management, utilization of human and material resources for minimum, efficient and effective inputs and maximum outputs (Dhanya, 2009:3).

These variables depict direct relationship between responsible leadership and accountability because all activities are tilted towards solving the needs of the masses in their collective efforts to achieve their leadership goals. A good leader knows his people and looks out for their wellbeing. A leader who is bereft of these tenets of good leadership is likely to cling on a super-ordinate to ride behind him and through him to success. This superior personality is a known and acclaimed successful and powerful man endeared by his people. He may be morally bankrupt and may as well be capable of mortgaging the future of his people through firm grip of the weak and poor 'subordinate leader' (political surrogate) who needs the influence of the big political juggernaut to have access to political power. This powerful and influential man is known as political-godfather while the parasitic-weak-leader is called political-godson. Godfatherism in Nigerian politics means that a politician might have sold his/her independence to a financier or a party power-broker in order to cling on him to climb into an elective public office. The godfather, therefore, sees politics as lucrative business venture where one can invest heavily with a view to harvesting abundantly the dividends of his 'hard labour' at the detriment of the society generally. In this context, the essence of human existence, virtues and integrity of mankind are rubbished and thrown over the bar. This is what Richard Joseph (1991) persuasively described as "prebendal politics". Richard Joseph (cited in Okoye, 2007:2) opines that 'prebendal politics' is the patterns of political behaviour which rest on the justifying principle that such offices should be competed for and then utilized for the personal benefit of office holders as well as of their references or support group.

Godfatherism And The Problem Of Accountability In Nigeria

The etymology of the concept "godfatherism", according to Anakwenze (2004:1), is located in Christianity. He argues that godparents are chosen as surrogates to help biological or foster parents raise a Christian child to become a God-fearing, law-abiding adult of the society. Most Christians had godparents that helped to shape their moral development; most particularly orphans who lost their parents early in their childhood were raised by godfathers. Therefore, the relationship between a godfather and a godchild is a sacred religious

responsibility in the Christian faith designed to guide and nurture the child to succeed in life. This is in every sense of it religious godfatherism. There are also economic godfathers – those who brought up less privileged people through scholarship awards, apprenticeship in the field of trading, blacksmithing, artisan, etc. and political godfatherism which is the discourse of this paper. The usage of the concept in this work represents political godfatherism.

On the other hand, Ajayi (2006:2) is of the view that the political process in Nigeria is experiencing the cultural hiccup of the impact of kingmakers (cultural godfatherism) on the kingship. He argues that in our traditional belief, there is a Mighty God somewhere that lesser gods report to and the kings are their servants on earth. With such understanding people tend not to go against the kings or traditional rulers because of the belief that they are second to lesser gods whom they have to obey. Once the king has been selected from among the kingship aspirants, the chosen king has to go back and pay homage to the kingmakers. Reciprocally, the kingmakers must publicly and traditionally respect the king. He anchors his argument of cultural leadership on economic perspective to the effect that once one invests his resources on a project he expects to make some profits and nothing short of profit. If the venture is not yielding any dividend, naturally one has to withdraw from the business. This holds fort the argument that godfatherism is an economic venture where people invest with the expectations to make huge profits thereafter.

It is pertinent to recollect that godfatherism, in which kingpins of the gangsters such as Al Capone criminal underworld played a major political role, first featured in political science literature in relation to the United States of America city of Chicago in the pre-World War II era (the term “godfathers” originated in Chicago). The heads of criminal gangs sponsored politicians in elections, manipulated the results to get them elected, and in return received protection and contracts from their political godsons. This process is consecrated in American political science literature under the euphemism of ‘party machine’ politics. The concept of godfatherism is firmly establishing itself as a guiding principle in contemporary Nigerian politics. Godfathers are generally defined as men who have the power personally to determine both who gets nominated to contest elections and who wins in all the elective offices in a state under their control (Ibrahim, 2003:3).

The concept of political godfatherism in Nigeria has gained prominence and assumed dominant feature of electoral politics and governance in the country. Godfatherism in Nigeria politics is a fundamental statement about the state of democracy in the country. Reverend Jolly Nyame, the Governor of Taraba State (cited in Ibrahim, 2003:2) lends credence to the relevance of godfatherism in Nigeria democracy as he asserts that “one thing in politics is that you must believe in godfatherism. If I did not believe in it, I would not be in daddy’s place. Whether you like it or not, as a godfather you will not be a governor, you will not be a president, but you can make a governor, you can make a president”. A politically acclaimed godfather in Anambra State, Christ Uba declared in a moment of intense self-satisfaction that: “I am the greatest godfather in Nigeria because this is the first time an individual single-handedly put in position every politician in the state.”

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). This noble trend in our political history has been bastardized by the new crop of political godfathers and 'puppet' politicians seeking elective offices through these political shylocks. The abuse and wrong application of the phenomenon of godfatherism by the key political players in Nigeria have made nonsense of the democratic and leadership values of responsibility and accountability. The interest of the people is mortgaged and the business of governance is survival of the fittest. If one can volunteer to sponsor a gubernatorial aspirant into the office of the Governor of a state, the state automatically becomes his personal estate and the toothless-Governor becomes the Estate Manager responsible to the estate owner – political godfather. He accounts to his mentor who appointed him Governor and jettison the interest of the electorates who know nothing about his journey to the state house. This has stunted human and infrastructural development in most states of the federation as most political office-holders no longer see themselves as holding their offices in trust for the people, but rather in trust for their godfathers, themselves and their relation. Consequently, it encourages corruption, breeds unemployment, poverty, political instability, electoral malpractices, etc.

In a situation where the 'Governor' of a state refuses to respect the terms of agreement with the godfather, the godfather will do everything within his power to frustrate the efforts of the government (the godson's administration) to direct dividends of democracy to the people of the state. Incidences of overt confrontation of godfathers against (godson's) Executive Governors of some states of the federation abound. The cases of Chief Jim Nwobodo versus Dr Chimaroke Nnamani, and Dr Chimaroke Nnamani versus Sullivan Chime in Enugu State; Chief Emeka Offor and Chinwoke Mbadinuju, and Chief Christ Uba and Dr Chris Ngige of Anambra State; and Chief Lamidi Adedibu versus Senator Rashidi Ladoja of Oyo State are examples of overt political conflict. Jibril Ibrahim (2007) cited in Okoye (2007:2) defines godfathers as men who have the power personally to determine both who gets nominated to contest elections and who wins in a state. Invariably, the political playground is dominated by few powerful individuals known as political godfathers. In their bid to strengthen their political forts, they invoke the sentiments of the existing parochial cleavages such as ethnicity and religion. Often, they succeed in mobilizing supporters on that platform through material inducements to retain their loyalty and pathetically inhibit the gullible masses from reasoning critically as citizens. Political godfathers move extra miles at all costs and by all means to retain and sustain their conquered empires. Godfatherism thrives in lawless society like Nigeria where state power is perceived as a commodity for sale and its acquisition puts one in good position to amass wealth. The godfathers act through surrogates who are not saleable to the electorates. The godson also believe that one cannot rely on the people to win democratic elections.

The Problem Of Accountability

As the political romance existing between godfathers and their godsons reduces the godsons to political stooges, they are solely responsible and accountable to their mentors and possibly their families. Since they were not elected by the people, they see their mandates as special favour from the 'kingmakers', and therefore cannot be accountable to the people. Public accountability is a system whereby public officers are made to give account of their

stewardship to members of the public (Obianyo, 2003:50). Fulfilment of electoral promises, provision of social amenities, access to education, creation of job opportunities, enunciation of poverty alleviation programmes to empower the populace are indices of development which the 'puppet godson' is bereft of hope. Accountability demands greater responsiveness to community groups and commitment to value and higher standard of morality; exercise lawful and sensible administrative direction; make new policies that will address the needs of the people and effect changes of existing laws that are not in tune with realities on ground (Ezeani,2003:3). A political godson who is not responsible to the people will not run open and transparent government. Rather a closed system approach is adopted to alienate the people from governance. Accountability is linked to government obligation to the people who possess the ultimate power and on whose mandate the government is temporarily holding the power. Power belongs to the people.

Conclusion

The political godfathers in Nigeria see governance and political power as the cheapest and surest method of amassing wealth to the detriment of the governed. Sponsoring a weak and poor candidate 'to win' election by appointment is seen as a lucrative business whereby the sponsor will invest heavily in imposing his candidate on the people as their leader, with all intent and purposes to make huge profit from the state coffer through the 'sorry-status-puppet' so-called 'Governor'. Godfatherism is a dangerous development in Nigeria politics. The electorates are impoverished the more, and the corrupt rich-godfathers are corruptly enriching themselves the more. The circle is endless. The solution to this menace is the serious problem facing Nigeria. Until a morally sound, committed and patriotic leader emerge to lead the people honestly with the attribute of transparency, openness, people-oriented policies and programmes, Nigeria political development will be a mirage.

References

- Adeyemi, L.O. (2006) "Democracy and the Free Market" in A.S. Hassan, A.A. Ogunsanya, J.O.Olujide, and J.O. Olaniyi (eds.) *Democracy and Development in Nigeria: Economic and Environmental Issues*. Lagos: Concept Publications Ltd.
- Anakwenze, N. (2004). A paper presented to the Convention of Anambra State Association, USA online: www.kwenu.com/lectures/anakwenze_godfatherism.htm
- Dhanya, Joy (2009). Characteristics of a Good Leader. Online: www.Buzzle.com
- El-Rufai, M.N.A. (2003) "Is Liberal Democracy Encouraging Corruption and Corrupt Practices? The Privatization Process in Nigeria" in A. Aderinwale (ed.) *Corruption, Accountability and Transparency for Sustainable Development*. Benja-Ota: Africa Leadership Forum (ALF) Publications.
- Ezeani, E.O. (2003). "Public Accountability: A Conceptual Analysis" in E.O. Ezeani (ed.) *Public Accountability in Nigeria: Perspective and Issues*. Enugu: Academic Publishing Company.

Mondy, R.W., Sharplin, A. and Premeaux, S.R. (1990). *Introductor's Edition: Management and Organizational Behaviour*. Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon Inc.

Obiano, N.E. (2003). "Public Accountability in Nigeria Under Obasanjo's Regime: An Appraisal" in E.O. Ezeani (ed.) *Public Accountability in Nigeria: Perspective and Issues*. Enugu: Academic Publishing Company.

Okoye, I.K. (2007). *Political Godfatherism, Electoral Politics and Governance in Nigeria*. A paper presented at the 65th Annual Conference of the MPSA held in Chicago, USA; April 12 – 15

Omotola, S.J. (2006). "No Democracy, No Development or Vice Versa?" in H.A. Saliu, J.F. Olurunfemi, U. Lateef and S.B. Oludoyi (eds.) *Democracy and Development in Nigeria: Conceptual Issues and Democratic Practices*, Vol. I. Mushin Lagos: Concept Publication Ltd.

The Phenomenon of Godfatherism in Nigeria fits into what Richard Joseph persuasively described as "prebendal politics"

Online: www.triumphnewspapers.com/archive/DTO5012007/group5107.htm