

Neopatrimonialism and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/04/26/neopatrimonialism-and-democratic-consolidation-in-nigeria/>

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The third wave of democratisation which was believed to have started in the mid-1970s ushered in transitions of countries from non-democratic to democratic regimes. This transition began in Portugal and Spain and continued through the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War spreading through almost all countries (Huntington, 1991; Gates et al., 2007). As a result, the number of formal democracies skyrocketed from 41 in 1974 to about three-fifths of the world's countries in 2003 (Diamond, 2006). However, most of these democracies are struggling to consolidate. Mainwaring and Bizzarro (2019) contend that among the 91 new democracies that emerged between 1974 and 2012, 34 experienced breakdowns and 28 stagnated after the transition. The increasing trends of democratic breakdowns have led to the proliferation of studies by scholars interested in understanding why democratic transitions have resulted in stillbirth and lack of consolidation. Unfortunately, the answers to this question remain inconclusive despite generating scholarly debates.

Using Nigeria as a case study, this study argues that the inability of the country to achieve democratic consolidation stems from the neo-patrimonial nature of the Nigerian political system. A neo-patrimonial regime combines legal-rational and traditional patrimonial rule systems, consisting of clientelism, monopolistic rule, and prebendalism (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997). Neo-patrimonialism has stalled democratic transitions in Nigeria, leading to a lack of political inclusion. Consequently, institutional mechanisms meant to hold the government accountable, such as separation of power and checks and balances, only exist in theory as the executive exert enormous influence over other government institutions. Moreover, individuals occupying these institutions owe allegiance to their political godfathers since their appointments are patronage-based. This argument, analysed from the structural or institutional perspective, contrasts with the findings of a recent study by Sigman and Lindberg (2017), which state that neopatrimonialism in Africa does not hinder democratic consolidation. The study of Nigeria's democratic experience is vital, as the country is the largest democracy in Africa.

This essay is divided into four parts: the theoretical underpinnings, democratic institutions in Nigeria, why Nigeria is yet to achieve democratic consolidation, and concluding remarks.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Neopatrimonialism and Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation, like other contested concepts in the social sciences, does not have a specific definition. The absence of a generally agreed definition suggests the difficulty of determining "when a democracy has become consolidated" (Arthur, 2010:206). An indicator of consolidated democracy put forward in literature is the "two turn over test" by Samuel Huntington (1991), which occurs when winners of founding elections peacefully handover power after their defeat in a subsequent electoral contest, and the new winners, in turn, peacefully relinquish power to the victors of a later election. However, this test has been criticised by scholars such as Schedler (2000), who argues that electoral-based indicators are insufficient measures of democratic consolidation. Other scholars have proposed the longevity or generational test, which involves using regular competitive elections of at least twenty years to evaluate whether democracy is consolidated even if it does not result in a change of government (Beetham, 1994). Nonetheless, this measure is problematic because it is often challenging to evaluate the capacity of new democracies to resist a "shock or crisis" if governments stay longer in power (Abdulai and Crawford, 2010:29).

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Notwithstanding the conceptual challenges, this study will adopt Linz and Stepan's (1996:15) substantive view of democratic consolidation as "the only game in town" as it is more comprehensive. The three dimensions of Linz and Stepan's definition identified by Abdulai and Crawford (2010) are (a) behavioural, which implies the democratic regime is free from secessionist threats or fear of revolution. (b) attitudinal, when most people are committed to democratic principles in effecting political change. (c) constitutional, when the constitution forms the basis of conflict resolution. The absence of these three dimensions in Nigeria indicates that the country is yet to achieve democratic consolidation.

On the other hand, neo-patrimonialism refers to the coexistence of bureaucratic administration and patrimonial logic with "at least the pretence of legal-rational forms of state legitimacy" (van de Walle, 1994:131). Whereas *patrimonialism* is defined as a system based on personal relationships where an individual who exercises the sole right to rule derives its legitimacy from culture and tradition (Weber in Sigman and Lindberg, 2017), *neopatrimonialism* can be seen as a system of social hierarchy based on vertical power distribution giving rise to patron-client networks established around a strong individual or group. The three core components of neopatrimonialism which form the basis of discussion in this essay are: (a) Clientelism involving a reciprocal relationship between a client and patron where resources or public goods are being distributed in exchange for political support (Oarhe, 2013). (b) Prebendalism entailing the use of state resources by the incumbents to benefit themselves, supporters, political godfathers, or members of their cultural groups, regions, or constituencies (Joseph, 1987). (c) Personalisation of power in the political executive or monopolistic rule.

Democratic Institutions in Nigeria since 1999

This study adopts a minimalist understanding of democracy, focusing on democratic institutions and procedures due to the importance of formal and informal institutions in democratisation, especially regarding providing a stable mechanism where contending parties organise to influence political processes (Clark et al., 2017). The failure of democratic institutions in Nigeria to effectively perform their constitutional responsibilities after political independence in 1960 has led to a series of democratic reversals. From 1966 to 1993, Nigeria experienced seven successful coup d'états leading to military takeovers of political powers (Gberevbie, 2014). When Nigeria re-transited to democracy in 1999, several institutional mechanisms were put in place to protect the country's fragile democracy. The Nigeria constitution established democratic institutions such as the executive, judiciary, legislature. Furthermore, to prevent arbitrary use of political power by government institutions, procedures such as separation of power and checks and balances were entrenched in the constitution. Moreover, the Independent National Electoral Commission was established to organise elections into political offices, and anti-corruption bodies were established to combat corruption.

However, these institutions and procedures established are yet to be consolidated. This is evident in Nigeria's rising cases of electoral corruption and violence (Angerbrandt, 2018). Moreover, the electoral commission has been inefficient as the number of disputed electoral petitions by defeated opponents continue to rise in the country (Gberevbie, 2014). Also, the legislature and judiciary have not effectively performed some of their constitutional roles as political power is monopolised by the executive arm in Nigeria (Fagbadebo and Francis, 2016). Besides, anti-corruption institutions are used as a weapon to fight political opponents, and political appointments are based on nepotism. These have posed a challenge to democratic governance in Nigeria, leading to separatist agitations and demand for revolution. Furthermore, Nigeria is bedevilled with political violence from aggrieved groups such as the Niger-Delta militants who no longer trust the constitutional means of resolving conflict (Udoh, 2013). The presence of separatist agitations, demand for revolution and political violence points to the absence of the three dimensions of democratic consolidation identified by Linz and Stepan's (1996).

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The attributes of neo-patrimonialism have proven to be antithetical to democratic consolidation in Nigeria as it has resulted in institutional failure, which obstructs democracy in the country. The importance of functional institutions in attaining democratic consolidation is stressed by Fukuyama (2015), who contends that the inadequacy or absence of functional institutional mechanisms may destroy the foundation of a stable democracy. One of the manifestations of

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neopatrimonialism in Nigeria is the personification of political power by the executive. Although the separation of power between the executive, legislature and judiciary is a constitutional provision in Nigeria, the political executives have extensive power leverage over other branches of government. The legislature in the country is seen as an appendage of the executive, thereby depriving the legislature of equal status. This explains why only the executive is referred to as “government” by the Nigerian populace. The essence of separation of power is to prevent any organ of government from becoming too powerful and to guide against the abuse of political power. In the democratisation process, separation of power is essential as it helps to protect new democracies from democratic reversals and constitutional retrogressions (Jongerden, 2015). Without separation of powers, there will be a lack of government accountability. Francis and Fagbadebo (2016) contend that the prominence of the executive in governance in Nigeria has made it difficult for the legislature to design effective mechanisms for transforming their legislative potentials as a tool of enforcing accountability. Consequently, the legislature in Nigeria cannot exercise its oversight powers of holding the executive accountable independent of the influence of their political godfathers (Fagbadebo, 2019). The implication is that constitutional provisions for enforcing horizontal accountability, such as impeachment, are used as instruments of political harassment and intimidation due to weak institutions of accountability in the country (Fagbadebo, 2019).

The absence of horizontal accountability has hindered Nigeria from achieving democratic consolidation. Over time, the executive in Nigeria has displayed horizontal unaccountability through their highhandedness and disregard for legislative summons. A recent example of this contempt is the failure of President Buhari to honour the summon of the House of Representatives to discuss the state of insecurity in Nigeria on December 10, 2020 (Udemezue and Chioke, 2021). Another example of executive recklessness is the 2018 invasion of the National Assembly complex by the state security apparatus, which is an agency of the executive. This attack on the legislature represents a gross violation of the country’s constitutional order, a threat to its democracy and attestation of the executive monopolisation of power. However, there is also a manifestation of this contempt in the executive-judiciary relationship, as the executive in Nigeria constantly and deliberately ignored court orders. The failure of Buhari’s administration to release the former security adviser, Sambo Dansuki, despite being granted bails by the judiciary, is an instance of the executive serial violation of court orders (Uwazuruike, 2021). The dominance of the executive and, by extension, the overbearing power of the presidency in Nigeria undermines the principle of checks and balances. This also suggests that the country is exhibiting some attributes of hyper-presidentialism, which implies the ability of the president to subvert institutionalised limits on its powers or where the limits are insufficient (Baba, 2018).

The second feature of neopatrimonialism in Nigeria is clientelism. Nigeria’s political arena is built on a patronage system where a political godfather determines ‘who gets what, when and how. Scott (1972:92) defines godfatherism as “a special case of dyadic (two persons) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron or godfather) uses his influence and resources to provide protection or benefits or both for a person of lower status (client or godson) who for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services to the patron or godfather”. In Nigeria, the political godfathers dictate who contest elections and the eventual winners. The influence of the godfathers is dominant within a political party, as they take important decisions on behalf of other party members. Also, intra-party procedures used in selecting candidates are set-aside to accommodate the preferences of the godfathers (Ogundiya, 2010). This weakens the role of political parties as an important democratic institution.

Godfatherism in Nigeria is fundamentally different from the ‘big men’ phenomenon that previously dominated African politics. This is because the political godfathers are not interested in holding political positions. Instead, they control political institutions by proxy using their protégés, whom they unilaterally or in collaboration with other few political gladiators hand-picked to occupy public offices. In return, the godfathers demand substantial financial returns or power to control political appointments from their protégés as a reward for their investment (Lackey, 2013). Albert (2005) notes that godfatherism is not a negative phenomenon if the goal is to put the best individuals into elective offices. However, the godfathers in Nigeria have turned politics into business ventures, where elections are rigged to impose predetermined candidates on the electorate.

The activities of political godfathers in Nigeria have severe implications on participatory democracy. Godfatherism in Nigeria has led to the inability of the electorate to exercise their popular sovereignty without hindrance, as elections

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only serve to validate the godfathers' choices. Consequently, this has fostered a culture of political apathy because the electorates no longer trust the electoral process, thus resulting in the failure of ordinary citizens to influence major government decisions through elections. Aside from reducing the role of the electorates, election in Nigeria is characterised by massive fraud and violence. Nkwede et al. (2014) contend that the godfathers employ extremist tactics such as falsification of results, rigging, and ballot snatching during elections to ensure the victory of their desired candidates. As a result, elections in Nigeria fails to meet the minimalist democratic standard of being free and fair.

Another mechanism used by the godfathers to manipulate electoral contests in Nigeria is to put their protégés in charge of the electoral process, either as an electoral commissioner or head of the electoral body. A recent example is the unconstitutional nomination of Laretta Onochie as a commissioner of the Independent Nigeria Electoral Commission by President Buhari despite being a major stakeholder in the ruling party. It took a public outcry for her nomination to be rejected by the Nigerian Senate. In addition, there is the manifestation of clientelism in ministerial appointments in Nigeria as ministerial positions are usually reserved for party loyalists or given as a reward for their contributions in elections (Joseph, 2014). This is why President Buhari appointed individuals who contributed significantly to his election as cabinet members. The concept of godfatherism can also be used to explain legislative ineptitude and executive dominance in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, the third feature of neopatrimonialism, which is prebendalism, is closely linked with clientelism. Several studies have exposed the prevalence of rent-seeking practices by the country's three principal organs of government (Kifordu, 2010; Fagbadebo, 2019). In the 2020 Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International, Nigeria was ranked 149 out of 183 countries (Transparency International, 2021). The ranking represents a three places decline in the 2019 Corruption Perception Index, making Nigeria the second most corrupt country in West Africa. Nigeria's negative corruption ranking indicates the worsened nature of corruption in the country. One possible explanation for this worrying situation is that political offices in Nigeria are seen as an avenue of wealth accumulation and distribution. The primary reason for participating in politics at the gladiatorial level in Nigeria is prebendal, as public resources are used for personal or organisational gain. Instead of being accountable to their constituents, most politicians in Nigeria are accountable to their political godfathers.

This prebendal attitude implies that elections in Nigeria become a do-or-die affair where all forms of illegal means are deployed to achieve victory. This explains the prevalence of electoral violence in Nigeria. Besides, politicians who failed to meet the financial demands of the godfathers are either impeached or replaced at subsequent elections. For instance, the former Oyo State governor, Senator Rashidi Ladoja, was impeached for being 'ungrateful' to his godfather, Chief Lamidi Adedidu, after disagreeing on issues relating to political appointments and financial returns (Kalu et al., 2018). It is essential to state that the impeachment was possible because Chief Lamidi Adebibu indirectly controls the state's legislature through his protégés. Furthermore, anti-corruption bodies in Nigeria are inefficient since they are products of prebendalism. The anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria are either used by the executive to cover high-profile corruption cases or to witch-hunt political opponents. Prebendal practices among government institutions are antithetical to democratic consolidation, as it undermines political legitimacy and citizens' trust.

Conclusion

In this essay, neopatrimonialism has been used to explain why a country might experience democratic transition but not democratic consolidation. Since Nigeria re-transitioned to democracy in 1999, its experience with democratic practices has left much to be desired. The neo-patrimonial nature of the Nigerian political system, with attributes such as power monopolisation, clientelism and prebendalism, has hindered the country from having a consolidated democracy. This is because accountability mechanisms such as elections, separation of power and checks and balances have not been effective due to the overbearing nature of the executive and the activities of political godfathers. Furthermore, elections in Nigeria serve to validate the choices of political godfathers rather than a reflection of popular choice. This has implications on how electoral contest is perceived, leading to the inability of the electorates to exercise their popular sovereignty effectively. Consequently, this has weakened democratic institutions in Nigeria, resulting in corruption, political apathy, electoral malpractices, and violence. The above negates the principles of democracy and has obstructed Nigeria from experiencing democratic consolidation.

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