



Godfatherism and Nigeria's 2023 General Elections: The Case of Delta State

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the issue of godfatherism and its impact on the 2023 general elections, with a particular emphasis on Delta State, Nigeria. It raises questions about certain facets of Nigeria's democratic governance that have not been adequately examined, raising questions about the nation's unique problems. The February 2023 general elections in Nigeria were not without flaws as usual, and many issues militating against the consolidation of democratic rule in Delta state since 1999 are ubiquitous. The study considers the role of the godfather in facilitating or stunting democratic growth in Nigeria in general and Delta State in particular. Usurping the place of the masses through their manipulative tendencies of selecting candidates instead of free, fair, and credible elections or the abuse of the rule of law are common in the polity. The historical method of description and analysis was adopted, underpinned by Marx Weber's theory of power, to interpret the work further. The study interrogated both primary and secondary sources related to it. Primary sources, such as oral interviews and newspapers, and secondary sources, such as books, news magazines, and online publications, were consulted. The study revealed that godfathers are gatekeepers in the polity, and their functions are overbearing to the masses. The study also identified that because the masses are not allowed to vote or their votes no longer count, Godfathers select leaders who are not representative of the people and are not accountable to them. The findings further indicate that forcing the godfather out of politics may be dangerous, considering their power and position in the government. It, therefore, concludes making laws that will accommodate them might be a better alternative.

Keywords: Godfatherism, Impact, 2023 elections, Delta State, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Democracy is a form of government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." The citizens of a country elect leaders to represent them in this kind of government. Elections characterize democracy, public participation in politics, protection of citizens' rights, and adherence to the rule of law. One noticeable aspect of democracy and leadership is the concept of godfatherism, which is present in every society. Nigeria is a democracy that was adopted from the West. Upon independence, Nigeria adopted parliamentary democracy, but it was later changed to the presidential system of democracy by the 1979 Federal Constitution. Although many Nigerians believe Godfatherism has inflicted many injuries to Nigeria's nascent democracy and should be forced out of national politics, some believe such action may result in grave consequences on the polity. The phenomenon is a double-headed monster that has taken hold of the political system.

Godfatherism is an old phenomenon and predates 1999. However, it intensified its legitimacy and operation in 1999. Odorige avers that the phenomena or term is as old as man, functioning differently for different people in different locations. In the Catholic Church, godfathers are chosen from the congregation to shape and mould the godson's character into a responsible citizen. He asserts further that in France, their function includes lubricating the state's economy. In American films, they are the criminal boss in gangs connected to the government and its shady businesses. By implication, the Institute of Godfatherism exists worldwide, positioning them in a primate situation to influence the political arena. The phenomenon is also a product of the cultural lives of the people having established themselves before the present generation. As the Yoruba culture recognized the institution as "Baba Kekere," the Igbos termed it "NnamUkwu," and the Hausa called them "Maigida." They are identified

as (higher power) performing the same function of assisting their (godsons/daughters) who do not have enough power to stand alone. That goes to show that godfatherism is not a recent phenomenon.

Albert confirms that the phenomena had existed before this dispensation; instead, the tempo at which its operation had assumed had changed. The rapidity of existence and operations, its course, and its effect on the strengthening of democracy in Nigeria have been disturbing. Its composition had produced inequality and mediocrity in the polity. The phenomena negatively impacted Nigeria's socio-economic development by influencing election results favouring their handpicked surrogates who are unrepresentative and unaccountable to the people. The godfathers exercise such powers that leave the godson / daughter in perpetual subjugation, which in Nigeria is sealed with either a written agreement or a fetish act of oath-taking in shrines. If not followed strictly, an agreement would lead to untold crises between the two parties, duly meted out against the masses who would have received the dividends of democracy.

The reason why Nigerian politics have become corrupted is that the godfathers hold all the power and are using deceitful tactics to maintain their authority. They control the system by investing large sums of money to buy votes, turning Nigerian politics into a game where the highest bidder wins. It had dashed the hope of the commoner and the democratization process. This study shall attempt to capture the nature of the Nigerian godfathers, the Delta godfathers, and their performance in the 2023 general elections in Delta State, hoping to fish out some of their anomalies. The concept had featured in different forms, strands and shapes. However, providing a legitimate guide for the phenomenon enables them to perform satisfactorily.

2. Modus Operandi of Nigerian Godfathers

Marx Weber defines power as the chance that an individual or a group of individuals in a social relationship can achieve their own will even against the resistance of others. Although this definition is comprehensive and includes an extensive range of varieties of power, it is very apt to discuss the issue of godfatherism and the 2023 general election in Delta State, Nigeria. For one thing, Weber's definition of power primarily concentrates on society and states that this discussion centred on. He argues that power is the ability of an actor or actors to achieve their objectives, ambitions, and goals, even in a contest against their opponents in a social relationship, unlike Karl Marx, whose basis of power only on economic sources (i.e.,

ownership or non-ownership of means of production), power can also emanate from status or party (association concerned with acquiring power). Weber considers class and status group membership as the basis of social power. He stressed that the formation of political parties has more influence upon power in modern society, like Delta State or Nigeria.

The kingmakers of Nigerian politics have deliberately restricted access to their "clique." They deliberate on who should be admitted to their group, which has become a distinct social class. It is important to note that any group that is denied the right to participate in or remain in society represents a dangerous position they hold in the political arena. To maintain their exclusive existence and interests, they must admit new members in a manner consistent with their attitude of separating themselves from the general public. These limitations are evidence of the corrupt channels and tendencies that make it challenging, if not impossible, for many people to enter.

Godfatherism in Nigeria's political situation is fraught with many anomalies. It has distorted the smooth running of political parties and democracy. To this end, it had caused the fall of many potential aspiring candidates who could not be contracted into their fold for one reason or another. In most cases, persons who initially cannot deliver are imposed on the electorate. It gives room to inefficiency and obstructs the effective democratization process. More so, it has transformed the government into an authoritarian regime instead of strengthening democratic processes by tampering with candidates' selection process, including selection into positions of responsibility in the executive cadre. In the process of playing back against their godsons in case of disagreement, this phenomenon had caused untold corruption, violence and destruction of lives and properties, as was experienced in Oyo, Anambra, Kwara, Borno and Edo states. Dr. Chris Ngige and his godfather, Chris Uba, are typical examples. Much of such madness had led to unlawful impeachment, chaos and all kinds of political intrigues and battles.

It is now a general opinion that Godfatherism had turned Nigeria's democracy into a money-making business, manipulating every available opportunity to bring their godson/ daughter as an economic investment that must yield superlative dividends at all costs. The surge had graduated from incorporating some other aberrations, such as the biased attitude of the electoral bodies and the law enforcement agencies, including observers, to favour the government of the day or collaborate to perpetuate further the undermining of the electorates and support the

government to stall the growth and development of democracy in the country. The judiciary, which was to be the masses' last hope, is not left out in the hands of the godfathers. Having occupied the state power, the godfather directs who should occupy such reverend positions in the judiciary that will protect their interest by all means. Their influence also covers the electoral offices, such as the independent election bodies, including federal and state. The weakness of such institutions as the judiciary and electoral bodies is a severe impediment leading to the masses' apathy to the general conduct and operations of the system.

It is essential to observe that certain factors have contributed to the creation and survival of the above phenomenon. Poverty, which is the most dangerous of the black race problem, might be considered primary in this regard. Many young and older people, desperate to hold political positions but having no resources to acquire them, resort to the patronage of a godfather. Coupled with this is society's gross unemployment of both old and young. Since the political arena can accommodate people from all spheres of life, the unemployed find refuge quickly and comfortably in politics, leading to pitching their tent anywhere provided they are accepted. Therefore, asserting that every political officeholder in Nigeria is a godfather is not out of place.

Godfathers occupy the entire nation. Godfathers are persons or institutions that empower their client or godson to settle a political position and should, in return, obey the dictates of the godfather. In Nigeria, the agreement had exceeded mere words to the sealed agreement in a shrine involving oath-taking. The godfather sometimes taught their godson, which in most states had resulted in a crisis of great consequence, destroying public and private properties worth millions of naira. Godfathers generally usurp the power of the electorates, which negates the principle of democracy, which the godfathers are standing on its tripod to operate. Democracy recognizes the masses as the recipient of democratic values, enjoying free and fair elections and expecting political appointments and other dividends of democracy to be shared equitably. The desired virtues are not demonstrated by the godfather who, instead, operates in every facet of manipulative technique, robbing the electorates.

3. Godfathers in Nigeria's Political Parties

Nigeria operates a multiparty system, but there are two dominant parties, the All Progressives Party (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Before the 2023 general election, there was a high level of the manifestation of the Godfather show in Nigeria.

President Ahmed Bola Tinubu, described as a kingmaker, had established his posture to take over from President Buhari long before he became Nigeria's President, hence the slogan- 'emilokan,' That is, "it is my turn." That slogan was manifest during the presidential campaign, and many Nigerians who did not understand the full import of that slogan did not take it seriously. But those who understood described him as a kingmaker who wanted to be a king. Rudolf affirms that in Nigeria, the power broker determines who becomes the President, which was what prevailed in the 2023 general election. The election's outcome was not based on qualification but on the godfather's decision. That is evident in the fact that godfathers sometimes are not just one person but a group of persons, sometimes called a cabal. Before becoming Nigeria's President, Senator Ahmed Bola Tinubu, popularly known as Jagaban, meaning 'leader of warriors' (a title awarded to him by an emir in the north), had served as Governor of Lagos state from where he acquired the tact of a godfather. He had successfully produced his boys as Lagos State Governors after him, from His Excellency Fasola to the incumbent Governor, Jide Sam Olu. An attempt by His Excellency Ambode to assert his authority in Lagos politics by challenging Tinubu's establishment cost him a second term in office as Lagos Governor. He also has towering political influence across the Yoruba States and has since been regarded as the godfather of the entire southwest Nigeria.

President Ahmed Bola Tinubu is a first-class godfather in Nigeria, with enormous wealth and fame, and his tentacles are spread all over Nigeria, resulting in his winning the APC presidential primary and the general election. Despite several allegations against him, he was inaugurated as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, an instance of the ills of godfatherism and the exercise of power as was enunciated by Marx Weber. Emphasizing further on why he won the presidential election of March 2023, Carson, a diplomat and an observer, concludes thus: "he got the money; he had the best national organization that worked for him and the ground game." To him, for a candidate to win an election in Nigeria, as applicable in most democratic countries of the world, three things, including substantial financial resources, are needed. The other items are a national working organization and grassroots acceptance. He avers that while Tinubu possesses all these attributes, his immediate contenders lack them.

Alhaji Atiku Abubakar is another prominent godfather who played a vital role in the 2023 general election in Nigeria. He was a governor of Adamawa state in 1990, 1996, and 1998 before ascending to vice president of

the Federal Republic of Nigeria in 1999 and being re-elected in 2003. After this, he has been contesting the presidency six consecutive times without success. In 2007, he competed under the Action Congress of Nigeria, ACN. He tried again in 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023, but to no avail. In building up to the People's Democratic Party's Presidential Primary Election in 2022, before the 2023 general election, Atiku and his team advised the party not to emulate the APC in their zoning of the presidential slot to the south. To suit his ambition, he lobbied against zoning, which in the end favoured his chances of being the presidential candidate of the PDP. He played the godfather role in the party that led to the stepping down of many contenders, the aftermath of which was the withdrawal of many stakeholders, including the G-5 Governors. This situation cost the PDP a significant disorder that was not cured even before the election. The problem was not limited to that; all the political bigwigs in Nigeria are godfathers at their various levels.

The Role of Godfathers in Delta State Politics

Delta State Godfathers are leaders who forged themselves in alliance to have firm control of their respective constituencies, collectively known as the Ibori political family founded by His Excellency Chief James Onanefe Ibori and the former Governor of Delta State. It is an organisation of godfathers who control the state government. The Family started before the 1999 general elections and evolved to the centre stage, having fought and defeated several opposition groups such as Chief E.K. Clark, Chief Godswill Obielum groups at the party level, Chief Great Ogboru (who fought from the opposing party), and recently, Ovie Omo-Agege (Deputy senate President) experience. The family members include and are not limited to Chief Senator Ighoyota Amori, His Excellency, Dr. Emmanuel Uduaghan, Senator James Manager, His Excellency, Senator Ifeanyi Okowa, The immediate past Governor of Delta State, Late Senator Patrick Osakwe, Senator (Barr.) Senator Peter Nwaobishi, Late Senator Nosike Ikpo, and others. Their leadership is categorised (according to constituencies and class) to ease decisions and agreements. Their operations are determined according to state, senatorial, local government and wards. They are fully established in every sector of Delta State. In agreement, the Family zoned the governorship seat in Delta state on a Senatorial district basis and not on an ethnic basis. The Family is so powerful that Chief Ighoyota Amori boasted that the Ibori political family should continue to produce the state Governor. While reacting to Chief James Manager's visit to Chief Ibori before the PDP primary election in Delta State to solicit his support, commentators said that the zoning is an opportunity to circumvent the people's wish to elect their candidates.

The origin of the Ibori dynasty started before the 1999 general elections. Analysts suggest that Chief Ibori brought the Grassroot Democratic Movement (GDM) to Delta state, where he mobilised only men and women below 40, with him as the general commander. Dr Ifeanyi Okowa coordinated GDM in Delta North, Dr Emmanuel Uduaghan and Senator James Manager (south). Senators Nwaoboshi and James Manager are leaders in the group. Anaize avers that Chief Clark was Chief Ibori's godfather until they fell apart when Chief Ibori made his cousin Dr Emmanuel Uduaghan his successor without consultation with the elder statesman. That disagreement, as it has always been in situations like this, brought a crisis that led to the waste of an enormous amount of money on litigation and by-elections, and the recipients of this are the masses whose expectations of the dividend of democracy were cut short.

The story of the emergence of the Ibori political family dates back to 1996. The Grassroot Democratic Movement (GDM) family merged with the Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN) to control nine local government areas they won in the state election before Gen. Sanni Abacha's junta sacked them. From the onset, the Family was determined to take power, so formed the Delta National Congress in Warri. The Congress was the bridge or conveyor that brought them to the G-34, eventually metamorphosed into the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Today, the Ibori political family holds power virtually over any other in the state. They have produced almost all the elective and appointive positions in the state since 1999. The group's products are the State governors, Senators, House of Assembly members, and the Local Government Chairmen and their executives. However, this does not mean there were no betrayers, political scavengers, or others who felt the Family could not contain them. For instance, Senator Ovie Omo-Agege, Chief Ayiri Emami, Olorogun O'Tega Emerhor, Rt. Hon. Victor Ochie and Dr Cairo Ojugbo were Chief Ibori disciples but have pitched their tent in the APC.

4. The Godfathers and Delta State 2023 Elections

Before the 2023 general election, the various groups, political families and party executives displayed political techniques. The PDP experienced severe internal crises concerning the choice of candidate for the gubernatorial Seat between His Excellency Chief James Ibori, leader of the group and the immediate past Governor, Senator (Dr) Ifeanyi Okowa. As godfathers, they demonstrated their manipulating tendencies during the crisis. Elections were

either improperly or insufficiently performed. Corruption permeated every step of the process, and they frequently used fraudulent methods in their surveys, both at the state and federal levels. Violence and insecurity have always been the outcome of their manipulations.

Niger Delta election update of January- March 2015 published that election-related issues also included the fraudulent distribution of election materials by supporters of the Ibori political family and reactions by the opposing parties. The consequence was a crisis in major towns in Delta State, including Sapele, Udu and Effurun. Consequently, the display of thuggery and youth groups' fanatic show that preceded it has adverse effects of frustration and confusion to the polity. Before that, there was a protracted crisis in Delta State arising from the fraudulent and manipulated ways in which federal and state elections were conducted. Observers claimed that the election umpires failed to carry out voter registration in such a way that proves that the number of registered voters conforms to the population on the ground.

Election crises are common among parties. The manipulations and fraudulent tampering of delegate lists during primaries constitute another severe challenge to the system. That has resulted in a double delegates list as it recently engulfed the APC, which had Prophet Jones Erue as an executive, with Olorogu O'Tega Emerhor as its head, and Chief Cyril Ogodo led the faction. Many say the PDP experienced such rivalries and crises between 2003 and 2007.

Delta State godfatherism had seized the selection process of appointees to political offices. They manipulate it, including privatizing and "familiarizing" them. While still in prison, for instance, Chief Ibori made his daughter a House of Assembly Member representing Ethiope - West Local Government Constituency. She has served her second tenure and secured the House of Representative Seat of her constituency. Former Governor Uduaghan's daughter served as Special Assistant to Governor Okowa on Small and Medium Enterprises. At the same time, Governor Okowa's daughter served as Senior Special Assistant on Girl Child and secured the House of Assembly Seat in her constituency. In like manner, the Late (Senator) Patrick Osakwe of Delta North Senatorial District, after serving in the Senate from 1999 to 2011, made his son, Barr-Ifeanyi Osakwe, Chairman of his Ndokwa-West Local Government Area. Senator Osakwe is a beneficiary of the Ibori political family, having been returned to the Senate for the third time through the Accord party (2007-2011) after Chief Amadu Ali (the then National Chairman of

the PDP) failed to secure his candidacy in PDP instead gave same to his wife. Late Senator Patrick Osakwe was the Ibori political dynasty's ordained godfather of the Ndokwa/Ukwuani federal constituency before his demise in 2021.

Before the 2023 general election, the various groups, political families and political parties in the polity displayed political techniques. The People's Democratic Party (PDP), for instance, experienced a severe internal crisis concerning the choice of candidates for the gubernatorial Seat between Chief James Ibori and Senator (Dr) Ifeanyi Okowa. Part of the crisis arose from Chief Ibori's stance on producing a candidate that may be generally acceptable to the group. In the end, the power of incumbency prevailed, and the Speaker of the Delta State House of Assembly, R.T. Honourable Sheriff Oboreowhorie, emerged, who also achieved victory in the general election. The Deputy Senate President, Senator Ovie Omo-Agege, emerged as the candidate of the opposing APC and exercised his political feats but could not outsmart the PDP, and its candidate was declared Governor-elect. The key political players technically and peacefully managed the power play. Despite the vigorous campaigns and series of decamping and counter-decamping, the incumbent government successfully swept the opponents. The failure of Senator (Dr) Ifeanyi Okowa to secure his Vice Presidential ambition also accounted for the sympathy vote and patronage of the PDP. The disagreement among the top players may have caused a heated dispute, and it manifested in the defence of the godfathers' interest.

All the elections and appointment positions are reserved for godfathers, their cronies and surrogates. In all the senatorial districts, the imposition of candidates and the appointment of surrogates are standard practices. Even in the opposition party APC, the system is fraught with irregularities and manipulation of all kinds, disenfranchisement of voters both in the parties and in the general elections and finally, polluting the electorates with gifts and peanuts.

Senator Augustine Ovie Omo-Agege, former Deputy Senate President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the All Progressive Congress gubernatorial candidate in Delta state in the 2023 general election, was a disciple of Chief James Ibori. He represented the Delta Central Senatorial District in the Senate. He became very popular after he allegedly led thugs into the Senate chambers and whisked away the mace, the Senate symbol of authority. By that act, he defiled the leadership of the Senate and continued to attend sittings even after being suspended. His action

demonstrated his loyalty to his godfather, President Mohamadu Buhari, who was under threat of impeachment by the Senate. His party, the APC, rewarded him with the post of Deputy Senate President.

A godson who showed loyalty in defence of the interest of his godfather, Omo-Agege was thus fully empowered to seize all the APC structure in Delta State. He used the power to bar anybody from his group from contesting the 2023 election under the APC. The power was so strong that he turned the state party executive to his staff. Omeni Sobotie, his former political adviser, became State Chairman and his Personal Assistant (PA), Felix Morka, became National Publicity Secretary of the party. He made all his aid in the office, state party executive. It was uncomplicated for him to lure or manipulate the then Central Bank Governor, Mr Emefiele, to purchase the presidential ticket to contest against Tinubu, whom he considers not an ally. It was also remarkable that Omo-Agege made himself the sole gubernatorial candidate of the APC in Delta State. He accentuated the success of the APC in securing two senatorial Seats out of three in the state, with Ede Dafinone defeating Chief Igyoyota Amori in the Central Senatorial District and Joel Thomas in the State's South Senatorial District. The APC also secured the Ughelli North, Ughelli South, and Udu Federal Constituency Seat with Reverend Francis Ejiroghene Waive as the standard flag bearer and godson of Omo-Agege.

The Ndokwa/Ukwuani Federal Constituency witnessed godfather practice during the 2023 general election. It is important to note that the emergence of Admiral M C. Onah as the leader of the PDP family after the demise of Senator Patrick Osakwe brought a significant change to the polity. Admiral Onah (Rtd.) is a benevolent and philanthropic man the entire constituency holds in high esteem. His entrance into the system changed the tempo and injected trust into the party. The choice of the deputy Governor from his constituency had his endorsement and unalloyed support. The Deputy Governor, Sir Monday Onyeme, served as Chairman of the Delta State Internal Revenue Board and had demonstrated the same spirit of benevolence and philanthropy as his godfather. It was not very difficult to market him to the petty godfathers and the electorates despite the pressure from the opposing parties, who in turn chose their deputy Governorship candidates from the same area. The general acceptance of the leadership of Admiral Onah, in conjunction with the support of Senator Okowa, also accentuated the dropping of the candidacy of Rt. Hon. Ossai N. Ossai had spent three terms in the Federal House of Representatives. Rt.

Hon. Ossai wanted a fourth tenure, but his ambition was truncated for equity, to shift the position to Ndokwa-East State's constituency to enable the Ndokwa-West State's constituency to retain the deputy Governorship slot. The areas seem to have maintained a balance in political positions that might breed peaceful co-existence since 1999. This feat is attributed to the godfather role of the retired Admiral.

The 2023 general election in Delta state observed many instances of Weber's explanation of power. For example, despite Chief Ibori's concern about making Olorogu David Ederve Governor, the power of incumbency of Senator Ifeanyi Okowa prevailed. This also explains the enthronement of Hon. Nnamdi Ezechi, Hon. Erieteke Ibori, and Hon. Ngozi Okolie into the Federal House of Representatives.

5. Conclusion

Godfatherism as a phenomenon has erected a firm tap root in the political life of Nigeria and Delta State. It has almost become indispensable, suggesting that it can only be developed instead of attempting to erase it. It has devastating effects on true democracy. Hence, its operations negate proper democratic practices, including free, fair and credible elections, the appointment of people-oriented leaders and recognition of the position of the electorates in a democratic setting. The Delta state godfathers are not comparable to the "Jagaban" of Lagos state or the Chief Chris Ubah of Anambra State. However, the leaders occupying and performing the gatekeeping function of the phenomenon in Delta also commit most of the anomalies associated with it. Their contributions to the nascent democracy are the production of leaders who are neither representative nor accountable to the people but to the godfather. The 2023 general election showed that godfatherism is becoming more sophisticated in its operations and a disservice to society. That was evident from the primary to the main general election. They have displayed and continue to display so much money and power and manipulate the electoral process.

Decamping of members from one party to the other involving campaigns of calumny and hate speeches both in the social media and conventional media, and open-air rallies involving thugs were experienced. Yet, there seems to be a great level of agreement instead of coercion in settling political issues to avoid violence, creating the hope that democracy is evolving in Delta State as elsewhere in Nigeria.

The institutionalization of democracy means making the necessary laws to function and the position of the godfather to conform to democratic rules.

Therefore, there is a need for a constitutional amendment to prescribe legitimate roles for godfathers in Nigerian politics since they have become deeply rooted in all the States, and attempting to force them out is dangerous because they are a comprador bourgeoisie; they have no souls.

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