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The paradox of political elites in Nigeria: Implications for democratic development

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Abstract

This study examines the role of political elites in Nigeria's democratic system since the commencement of the Fourth Republic. Elite theory is adopted to analyze the nature of Nigerian political elites and the strategies they employ to retain power. The study highlights the inconsistencies in elite shifts during Nigeria's democratic transition, where the ruling class remains largely unchanged despite the move from autocracy to democracy. The professionalization of representation and the standing of politicians in political parties and civil society further complicate the relationship between citizens and rulers. The study also discusses the challenges and threats posed by political elitism to Nigeria's future, including economic downturns, political instability, and the creation of "divide and rule" ideologies. The actions of political elites have led to inadequate governance, a sense of unease, and the destruction of policies that support the economy and developmental frameworks. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for elites in Nigerian politics to re-evaluate their positions and create genuine ideologies that support the nation's citizens. The findings have implications for understanding the role of elites in democratic transitions and the challenges they pose to national development.

Keywords: Political elites, Nigerian democracy, elite theory, national development

Introduction

The fourth republic was welcomed in 1999 with high expectations of citizens' participation in the democratic process; these hopes were dashed with the registration of political parties and appointment of their chairmen. It was a clear representation of the elites' class within the social formation to compete, as it was, within itself, to elect/select the members of government.

We would discover that Nigeria strives to reflect on her diversity in political power allocation. Hence, consideration is given to the intrigues revolving around elite domination at the executive power-sharing level.

The reality of capitalism favours and empowers the elite over and above the critical mass of people in the choice of political leadership. This situation is reflected in all economically liberal states; the most developed democracies are governed by the elites. The contradictions in the democratic system of government, including the sheer size of resources required to participate in political leadership contests, and the interlocking connections between political actors as a requirement for actualizing the dreams of leadership, are testimonies to the notion that "capitalism and democracy share a number of fundamental premises in common" (Odubajo & Alabi 2014) [6].

Political elite is a status group among citizens of a nation-state (Odubajo & Alabi 2014: p. 121 cited in Oluwasegunota FOB & UC Osuji 2022) [6, 3]. Political elite is a "power elite": overlapping social and economic networks. The group comprises less than one percent ($\leq 1\%$) of the population. The elite exercises disproportionate power; the extent of this power varies with issue, over time, across states. They have various mechanisms to control the populace, ranging from direct to indirect rules, mechanisms, and information. They exercise four levels of power: occupying, prevailing, preventing, and manipulating (Odubajo & Alabi, 2014: p. 124; Murshed & Gates, 2005) [6, 7]. They exert economic control as managers, non-executive directors, and interlocking directorships integrate all major companies (Cited in Oluwasegunota, FOB, & UC Osuji 2022) [3].

Conceptualization

The elite theory is a theory of the state that seeks to describe and explain power relationships in contemporary society. The theory posits that a small minority, consisting of members of the economic elite and policy-planning networks, holds the most power and that this power is independent of democratic elections.

Through positions in corporations or on corporate boards, and influence over policy-planning networks through the financial support of foundations or positions with think tanks or policy discussion groups, members of the "elite" exert significant power over corporate and government decisions.

The basic characteristics of this theory are that power is concentrated, the elites are unified, the non-elites are diverse and powerless, the elites' interests are unified due to common backgrounds and positions, and the defining characteristic of power is its institutional position.

Elite theory opposes pluralism (more than one system of power), a tradition that emphasizes how multiple major social groups and interests influence various forms of representation within more powerful sets of rulers, contributing to decently representative political outcomes that reflect the collective needs of society.

Background of Nigerian political elites

The term 'power elite' is another term for the political elites of Nigeria. In the past, Nigerian elites have flawed bourgeoisies since colonialism formed their social standing, economic dominance, and even their ideals and personalities. These members of Nigeria's political elite are a collection of people who currently hold or have held influential positions in the nation's political, economic, and social institutions. Together, these people have created policies that impact every Nigerian's chances of life. The President, Vice President, State Governors, Deputy Governors, Chairmen and Vice Chairmen of Local Councils, Federal and State Legislators, Judges of the High Judiciary, and Officers Corps (retired and in-service) are among the specific political elites.

The list also consists of university dons, traditional rulers supported by governments, and religious leaders who are Christians and Muslims. Individuals who have entered politics and business are also considered members of the ruling class. These elites typically hold the highest positions in Nigeria's political economy. Another approach to comprehend the emergence of political elitism is to examine the allocation of power within democratic governments. There are three main factors perceived as having an interest in governance. These are the power elites (power wielded by corporate owners/managers overlapping with "upper class"), the median voter (parties converge at the center of preference distribution), and pluralism (different coalitions of interest groups and voters; prevailing on different issues; dispersed inequalities).

Even though the longest continuous longevity of a political regime has occurred since 1999, violent changes and upheavals have nevertheless accompanied previous and current transfers of elite power and roles. The problem here is not limited to the historical lack of agreement on changes in regimes, or the prevalence of violent disputes over elite succession in important national government posts. This study focuses on the distinctive pattern of social makeup and the personality of the elite that has attained and

maintained political power within the national executive government.

Even though the civilian government has been in place since 1999, elite successions, especially in the highest executive government positions, have been characterized by intrigues, violent conflicts, and turnovers in high executive government positions, even though the civilian system has been stable since 1999.

The inconsistencies of elite shift in democratic Nigeria

It is impossible to imagine the problems that the political elites' movements and groups are causing in Nigeria's democratic process. This paradox can be understood in three ways. First, merely based on etymology, "the rule of one person (or small group of persons)" should give way to "the rule of the people (or that segment of the people possessing equal political rights as citizens)" in the shift from autocracy to democracy. In the former, there is no political elite and citizens rule directly or indirectly through agents they appoint to represent them; however, in the latter, the government is made up of a political elite that is obviously separated from and not answerable to the people. Second, it is not clear from a realistic standpoint what the roles of the elites' and their policies' are in the process of changing the regime. Elites orchestrate many plots and deceptions. As a result, the functions of individual representatives as go-betweens for people and their authorities have become increasingly important. However, once more, if these positions are not clearly defined, some of these representatives will inevitably rise to positions of authority and elite membership. This suggests that there is no significant contrast between autocracies and democracies. Nigerian democracy is typified by the "rule by some politicians," or "polito-cracy", as opposed to "rule by a few verses rules by all." These newly empowered delegates will inevitably create institutionally distinct ruling elites.

How can Nigeria's democratic governance model for regime transition be a vague process of elite transformation? An explanation of how a particular polity transitions from an autocracy to democracy and vice versa is required. This shift is based on political interests and ideological representation, as much as the type of political system in which it occurs. This indicates that since many members of the "new" democratic elite are descended from the previous regime, nothing has truly changed. This is seen in the ease with which political parties are established in Nigeria: leaders join one party today, leave, and quickly join another. If this is not enough, many theories and empirical studies have reminded us.

Third, the trend toward professionalization of representation and, consequently, the standing of politicians in political parties and civil society has recently intervened to further complicate this mediated relationship between citizens and rulers. Liberal democratic theory initially assumed that the length and commitment of a politician's term were determined by the result of a contest between political parties or by the decision of the winners (elected or not) to return to their previous lives. To put it briefly, the assumption was that politicians lived "for politics," not "from politics." This trend toward the latter has already been well-documented in well-established democracies. However, recently established democracies appear to have spread swiftly as amateurs.

The general situation is the same whether going from autocracy to democracy, or from republican to princely governance. Furthermore, the inference was the same (Schmitter, 2021) ^[8]. When a regime is collapsing or changing, the autonomous decisions made by actors a concept he refers to as *virtù* in selecting and institutionalizing a new set of rules take on greater significance than they did during "normal times," when necessity was predictably embedded in a pre-existing and hegemonic set of rules (Schmitter, 2021) ^[8]. Thus, the era of transition may lead to a shift in the ruling class (or, in Machiavelli's case, the one ruler), but it may also give agents a remarkably high degree of discretion in making these decisions (Schmitter, 2021) ^[8]. If this were not enough, non-democratic elites embedded in the so-called "guardian institutions" of state agencies, commissions, directorates, boards, central banks, courts, administrative staff, and so on are what make up all real existing democracies (Schmitter, 2021) ^[8]. These elites may be granted certain powers by democratic elites but are expected to make binding decisions based on their expertise (civilian or military) and are, therefore, purposefully shielded from the vicissitudes of political competition. Consequently, their continuity is likely to be even greater during and after the transition from autocracy to democracy than that of elected or selected political representatives. Nigerian democracy appears to be an electoral autocracy in which the Nigerian government exists.

Political elitism's challenges and threats to Nigeria's future

No nation state has its own elite. The Nation-state's founding fathers are among these elites. Elites in Nigeria in the past, such Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and many more, were visionary leaders who aspired to a more powerful nation-state. Political elitism is one of the issues that the Nigerian state is currently dealing with. In addition, Nigeria deals with political unrest, insecurity, poor leadership, gender disparity, and a host of other issues masterminded by the elites of the country (Odubajo & Alabi, 2014: p. 122) ^[6]. Political elites are at the core of such issues. Nigerian elites utilize their power to incite economic downturns and political instability, which makes the nation unstable (Kia & Vurasi, 2013) ^[1]. The actions of these elites lead to bad governance and uncertainty, which encourages negotiation. Consequently, the nation has become unstable. Due to the actions of these elites, there is inadequate governance, a sense of unease that leads to negotiations with unidentified parties, and "fictional tribes and tribal fictions". To stay in power, these elites create "divide and rule" ideologies. They have an impact on development trends; in Nigeria, for example, they decide who receives what and why. To achieve their goals, particularly during elections and the electoral process, they also resorted to violence and force. To make the poor feel insecure, hungry, underdeveloped, and less powerful, they construct class and calibrate in such a way that the populace now realizes that "governance is intrigues" in Nigeria. Policies that keep Nigerians together, support their economy, and preserve their developmental frameworks are being destroyed by the actions of the country's political elites.

The political system in Nigeria is diverse, ranging from political structuralism to the fundamentals constructed by

politicians and political elites. Negotiations between social groupings and political elites typified Nigeria's 2019 election. Politicians in Nigeria nowadays often strike unofficial "bargains" that strengthen their bonds with specific social groups while regularly undermining official state laws, norms, and regulations that have detrimental repercussions for the nation-state. Acknowledging the importance of politics in all matters pertaining to the administration is vital. It is imperative to acknowledge the nature of the agreement between the state's elites and social or pressure organizations. This allowed us to keep an eye on the crucial.

Conclusion

This ambidextrous literature has implications for the elite. In reformative transitions, the composition of the elite would remain largely unchanged; in revolutionary transitions, the old elite would be overthrown, slain, imprisoned, or forced into exile, and a new elite would arise from the conflict itself. It goes without saying that in reality, there is a slight but noticeable difference between the two. The elites move around in the former and jump in the latter. We emphasize that the part elites play in generating contestation and disagreement within the Nigerian state. We also discuss how they affected governance, political processes, and decision-making while creating public institutions that carry out development. Elites in Nigerian politics must re-evaluate their positions and create genuine ideologies that will support indigenes.

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