

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN NIGERIA: CONTENDING ISSUES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

In interrogating the issues of local government and political accountability in this study, the specific objectives are to; examine how the local government practice in Nigeria has probably impeded the course of political accountability and to determine how the local government system can contribute to a better regime of political accountability in the country. The methodology of the study is logical argumentation. The theoretical framework is the elite theory. The elite were identified in the study as the principal characters that operate through a malfunctioning local government system, to establish a culture of political unaccountability in the Nigerian system. Findings of the study led to the conclusion that to bring about a regime of political accountability in the country, critical action has to commence from the local government level. And it has to entail ways of reducing the influence of the local and other elites, in the (local) governance system.

Keywords: Local Government, Political Accountability, Nigeria, Contending Issues

Introduction

The dual concepts of local government and political accountability are among the topical issues in contemporary social science discourses (in Nigeria). In this dimension, it has been concisely presented in Mbah (2011) that politicians in Nigeria are no longer accountable to the voters. Hence, the level of political corruption and lack of discipline demonstrate that the tenets and principles of accountability have become akin to a mirage in Nigeria. According to Anyadike (2011) also, government in Nigeria since 1960, both under the military and in civilian regimes, seems not to have focus, direction and bearing. And this fundamentally translates to an absence of political accountability. Onu (2011) further asserts that the Nigerian local government system, which constitutes the bedrock of the society, is not unconnected with this precarious situation of lack of accountability, as the perilous situation persists. The local governments have accordingly become breeding grounds, for insensitive politicians whose conducts negate the tenets of political accountability.

In interrogating these issues in this study therefore, the specific objectives are to: (i) examine how the local government system in Nigeria has impeded the course of political accountability and (ii) determine how the local government system can contribute to a better regime of political accountability in Nigeria. The methodology of the study is logical argumentation. The theoretical framework is the elite theory.

Conceptual Elucidation

Local Government

Local government, like other concepts in social sciences does not have one definition that is acceptable to all. This is because there are various definitions of this concept given by different authors (Anyadike, 2011). Hence, Okoli (2005) defines local government as a unit of government, established by act of law, to administer the functions of government, and see to the welfare and interest of the local dwellers, under the local government system. According to him, government at this level guarantees a situation in which the local people can elect their representatives, who can make decisions on matters relating to the interest of the people, makes rules and policies governing their local affairs, and be able to raise revenues from both internal and external sources in their areas of jurisdiction (Anyadike, 2011). According to Mbah (2011), local government can therefore be described as a system of government where the central government or state government sets up subordinate units of administration and vests in them, the authority to perform local functions. The problem with this position however, is that it blurs the distinction between local government and local administration.

According to Ezeani (2012), definitions of local government have been subsumed under two broad approaches, as reflected in the literature. The first approach, which is usually adopted in comparative studies, regards all sub-national structures below the central government as local government. A major criticism of this approach he posits, is that not all sub-national structures below the central government possess the essential characteristics or features of local government. Ezeani (2012) further explains that the second approach to the definition of local government identifies it by certain defining characteristics or attributes which are essential to distinguishing it from all other forms of local institutions and also, to ensure its organizational effectiveness.

The concept of local government contends Abonyi (2011), involves a philosophical commitment to democratic participation, in the governing process at the grassroots level. This implies legal and administrative decentralization of authority, power and personnel, by a higher level of government to a community, with a will of its own, performing specific functions, as within the wider national framework. Lawal (2000) cited in Abonyi (2011) also sees local government as that tier of government closest to the people, which is vested with certain powers, to exercise control over the affairs of people in its domain.

Ogunna (1996) posits that local government can be defined as a political authority, which is purposely created, by law or Constitution, for local communities, by which they manage their local public affairs within the limits of law / the constitution. This definition actually, highlights the communal nuance of local government (Idike, 2013, 2015). Thus, according to Ibietan (2010), local government in the communal sense means people's political instrument to participate in resource allocation, distribution and power acquisition. Furthermore, Ogunna (1996) highlights that local government serves as a good training ground for national politics, as councilors gradually gain the art and craft of politics. Hence, all of this alludes to the participatory and representative nature of local government, for its essence to fully manifest.

The *Guidelines for the Reform of Local Government in Nigeria (1976)*, further comprehensively states that:

Local government is the government at the local level exercised through a representative council established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial

powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal governments in their areas, and ensure, through active participation of the people and their traditional institutions that local initiatives and response to local needs are maximized.

Ezeani (2012) highlights that implicit in the above definition are certain salient or distinguishing features of local government, which include:

- (i) Localness: Local government is the lowest tier of government; it is the government at the grassroots or local level.
- (ii) It has a legal existence enshrined in the Constitution.
- (iii) It enjoys substantial autonomy.
- (iv) It exists within a defined territory.
- (v) It exercises its authority over a given population.
- (vi) It exercises specific powers and performs certain functions as enshrined in the constitution.
- (vii) The council of the local government is composed of elected representatives of the local people.
- (viii) Local government is usually divided into departments, divisions and units which facilitate the accomplishment of its goals, objectives and functions (Ezeani, 2012:11-13)

Local government may truly refer to the act of governing at the local level. It can also refer to the government of a particular area. However, there is the next derivative of the concept that is denotable as local government area. In this regard, according to the United Nations Office for Public Administration, Local Government is the political sub-division of a nation or (in a federal system) a state, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs including the powers to impose taxes and exert labour for prescribed purposes (Ogunna, 1996). It exists within a defined territory (Ezeani, 2012). In this study therefore, the concept of local government also refers substantially to the derivative of local government area. The focus of the study is consequently on what obtains in the local government areas during general elections in the country.

Political Accountability

Okoli (2011) identifies political accountability as a variant of public accountability. He further suggests that political accountability means that political office holders are accountable and answerable to the people. When this happens, they become the servants and not the masters of the people; they respond to the yearnings, demands and aspirations of the people, thereby promoting good governance. However, he further highlights: for political accountability to be so-called, the electoral system must be such that the votes of the people count, in free and fair elections. Citing Amoke and Asogwa (2000), Mbah (2011) also identifies political accountability as a type of public accountability. Mbah (2011) further posits that political accountability deals with responsibility for stewardship, it demands that officeholders should meet the expectations of the electorate, by fulfilling the promises made in the manifestoes of their political parties, as well as their actions while in office.

It will be instructive to highlight again at this point that conceptually, this study is not about the problem of political accountability in the local government system in Nigeria. I know that there may arise the tendency to interpret the topic in this direction. But that is not what the study set out to research upon. It is fully conceded that the problem of political accountability in the local government system in Nigeria is a fully researchable issue on its own but the two different conceptualizations have their different focuses. The objectives of the study have already identified in two specific terms what the study has set out to

investigate. The core of the study is on how the local government setting has endangered political accountability in the wider Nigerian polity.

Theoretical Framework

Ebohon and Obakhedo (2012), cited in Idike (2014) explain that the term, elitism is the belief or attitude used to describe a situation in which power is concentrated in the hands of a limited number of people, with special privileges and responsibilities, in the hope that this arrangement will benefit humanity or themselves. The central theme of elitism is predicated on the axiom that all societies are split into two; namely: the haves; and have nots or the elite and the masses; the governor and the governed, etc. This formulation was expounded by the 20th Century Italian thinkers, Pareto (1935) and Mosca (1939). Therefore, the concept of elite denotes a select group of people with intellect, wealth, influence, power, prestige, authority, education, specialized training or experience, or other distinctive attributes, who determine how the society should be ordered and the modus operandi (Ebohon and Obakhedo, 2012).

Indeed, the elite are those whose views on a matter are to be taken the most seriously or carry the most weight; whose views and/or actions are most likely to be constructive to society as a whole; or whose extraordinary skills, abilities or wisdom render them specifically fit to govern. They may rely on some identifiable personal attributes commonly purported by elitist theorists to be characteristic of the elite, namely: rigorous study of or great accomplishment within a particular field, a long track record of competence in a demanding field, an extensive history of dedication and effort in service to a specific discipline or a high degree of training or wisdom within a particular field (Ebohon and Obakhedo, 2012).

In the application of elite theory to this study therefore, focus will be placed on how the elite might have impeded the course of political accountability in the Nigerian State. Further attention will be given to how the insensitivities of the elite may be successfully challenged, in order to bring about the desirable culture of accountability in the polity.

Contending Issues

In this section of the study, to give a highlight of the problem of political unaccountability in the Nigerian system, the contending issues and the local government factor, we will take excerpts from Eme (2011) as follows; hinged principally on the problem of a malfunctioning electoral system and the unscrupulousness of politicians:

The Nigerian electoral system has continued to pose one of the greatest dangers to the viability of the democratic system. The problems are regrettably multifarious, ranging from tenuous electoral laws to unscrupulous politicians. Again over the years, and significantly in the present dispensation, the officials of the electoral umpire have shown a high degree of ineptitude and corruption. The electors themselves have not helped matters. Their problems range from inertia to culpability in the malfeasance of a “do or die” electoral history and a “try, lose and die affair”, for those trying to confront the fraudulent electoral system.

The alternative options are scary, continues Eme (2011). To win you must join the political party in power. The alternative is the scorching heat and dryness of the wilderness of the opposition political party. In-between you have the soulless political prostitutes and entrepreneurs, of the bread and butter hue, who constantly change conditions and advances

(sic), looking for invitation to “come and eat”. In these festering sores of a malfunctioning electoral system, Nigeria had the worst political behaviour in her body politic, in the 2007-2008 local government elections. Specifically, Eme’s paper identifies the local government setting as being responsible for those major crises that have rocked the country since political independence; from the way the elections were conducted... the political elite could be endangering democracy, if there is no change of attitude (Eme, 2011:374). He argues in other words that all the electoral frauds that are perpetrated in the wider Nigerian political system are originated from the local government level. Ugandan (2010:86) further adds:

The plethora of maladies plaguing the Nigerian political landscape derives considerably from the poor disposition of political leadership to the cardinal democratic requirement of accountability. This stems primarily from a faulty electoral body that is also not accountable to the people. Products of this system are not conscious of public accountability, as they owe allegiance to powerful political godfathers and not the electorate. This cycle of unaccountability has conspired to frustrate long-term development in the country. Issues of misappropriation and embezzlement that have subsisted as cankerworms to the development process are products of a political orientation that disdains public accountability. In order to ensure development in the present and guarantee it in the long-term, there must be a committed compliance to the tenets of accountability by political leadership and a proactive demand for accountability by the people.

The endpoint of the foregoing scenario is the dearth of political accountability, principally emanating from a malfunctioning electoral system, already entrenched at the local government level by the treacherous elite. The People that Ugandan has called upon to demand accountability are all resident at the local government level. To bring about a change in the desired direction therefore, the electoral system must be transformed at the local government level and the elite betrayers have to be defeated.

However, the contending issues still critically revolve around the fact that, these same elite are the organizers of the elections, not the masses. They have the financial weight, for funding or manipulating the campaigns, thereby in duplicity, gaining access to power, where they continue to display lack of political accountability. The elite are indeed the dominant political actors in Nigeria’s brand of politics. They are the party leaders, the financiers of the party and the political godfathers. They are the possessors of the financial capital used in buying the votes of the culpable voters identified as part of the problem in Eme (2011). The elite are invariably the perpetrators of the electoral fraud that give rise to lack of political accountability when the ostensible winners of the elections assume office. Who then will bell the cat?

The Way Forward

The way forward is critically in the hands of the masses. In the first place, the Nigerian masses at the local government level must begin to reject the menacing elite at the polls. The local government level is strategically placed to serve as the commencement point of the masses’ reaction. Hence, the politically reckless elite at the regional / state and central levels usually return to the local government level to canvass for votes. This must be a time for political accountability. There must be determination on the part of the masses to reject the unending overtures of this class of leaders. Moreover, the local government platform is an easily identifiable level of influence for the masses. Hence, during elections, the political elite locate them (the masses) at their local government bases to buy their votes. Where the elite succeeded in the past in such vote-buying-businesses, the masses must henceforth

ensure that they fail. In the past, some untrustworthy elite succeeded in buying the masses votes and accordingly got the masses' vote during elections. In the new dispensation, they would think they have bought the votes but they will still be rejected at the polls.

At the local government level, retired teachers, head teachers and retired civil servants should register as members of political parties and participate in elections as candidates. At the initial stage of this new spiritedness by this class of citizens, the insatiable elite will fight back and ensure that the new entrants to the political arena lose the election. Gradually, it will become the norm that this class of citizens can stand for election and emerge victorious. Previously, they only participated as party agents and election observers in the elite-elections.

Women should also properly mobilize at the local government level, to participate in elections as candidates and to actually emerge victorious. We have the numerical power but have been failing to deploy it to victory in electoral contests in Nigeria, particularly at the local government level. To our male counterparts therefore, it has continued to be business as usual, devoid of political accountability. By women in this context, we refer to rural women at the local government level, not the women elite that are after all, not immune to the generic elite perfidy in the country. We refer in this case, to the market women and others in their category, that can win elections at the local government level and gradually ascend to higher pedestals of political representation at the national level.

Furthermore, at the end of elections / at the end of voting, the masses, the youth, the women have to begin to guard their votes to ensure that the perfidious elite that perpetrated the electoral fraud in the past are prevented from continuing with this electoral dishonesty. And as a matter of fact, Russell (1977) has strongly posited as follows:

Few men seem to realize how many of the evils from which we suffer are wholly unnecessary, and that they could be abolished by a united effort within a few years. If a majority in every civilized country so desired, we could, within twenty years, abolish all abject poverty, quite half the illness in the world, the whole economic slavery which binds down nine tenths of our population; we could fill the world with beauty and joy, and secure the reign of universal peace. It is only because imagination is sluggish, and what always has been is regarded as what always must be.

The things that could be brought about through the united efforts of the masses include political accountability. The things that could be abolished through such united efforts include the electoral fraud originated at the local government level. Electoral fraud and political unaccountability are truly wholly unnecessary but only few men and women seem to realize that such unnecessary evils could be abolished by the united efforts of the masses. It is indeed only because imagination is sluggish and what always has been is regarded as what always must be, that is why the local government level in Nigeria has continued to tolerate the incidence of lack of political accountability in the conduct of their own affairs and invariably the conduct of the entire Nigerian affairs.

Conclusion

Findings of this study have led to the conclusion that to bring about a regime of political accountability in the country, Nigeria, critical action has to commence from the local government level. Every segment of the country falls within a local government entity. Each of these local government areas has representatives at one level or the other in the entire Nigerian political system. Hence, if the wayward political elites from the various local government areas can be called to order from their various constituencies, the larger Nigerian

political area will witness tremendous progress. In the process, the relevance of the local government areas in the political system will become enhanced and political accountability will become entrenched in the political culture of the country.

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