



RESEARCH ARTICLE

POLITICS OF GODFATHERISM AND EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

The entrenchment of godfatherism in Nigeria's political architecture poses a formidable challenge to democratic consolidation and effective governance. This paper critically interrogates the complex interplay between political godfatherism and administrative performance in Nigeria, highlighting the paradoxes it creates within democratic institutions and public service delivery. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, including case studies from select Nigerian states, the study explores how political godfathers influence electoral outcomes, policy direction, and bureaucratic appointments—often prioritizing loyalty over merit, thus undermining institutional capacity and public accountability. The paper situates godfatherism within Nigeria's broader political economy, tracing its historical roots to the patron-client structures inherited from colonial and post-independence governance. It further examines the implications for democratic representation, fiscal discipline, and policy continuity, revealing a persistent tension between private interest and public good. However, the analysis also identifies emerging prospects for reform, including the growing role of civil society, electoral reforms, judicial interventions, and the digital empowerment of the electorate. By offering a nuanced evaluation of both the systemic dysfunctions and the transformative opportunities within Nigeria's political landscape, this study contributes to the discourse on democratic governance in Africa. It concludes with strategic recommendations aimed at curbing the excesses of godfatherism and promoting a more transparent, accountable, and citizen-centered administrative framework.

Keywords: Godfatherism, Nigeria, Governance, Political Patronage, Public Administration.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's democratic experiment, since the return to civil rule in 1999, has been deeply influenced by informal power structures that often subvert formal democratic institutions. Among the most enduring and contentious of these structures is the phenomenon of political godfatherism—a system where powerful individuals (godfathers) sponsor, control, or unduly influence elected officials (godsons) to protect personal or group interests. This practice, though not peculiar to Nigeria, has taken on a deeply entrenched character in the country's political and administrative landscape, often compromising the ideals of transparency, accountability, and good governance (Omodia & Aliu, 2017; Ibrahim, 2020).

Political godfathers operate behind the scenes, using their economic resources and social capital to influence electoral processes, policy decisions, and appointments to strategic public offices. This has significant implications for public administration, as it erodes meritocracy, undermines institutional independence, and weakens the capacity of government agencies to deliver on development goals (Aiyede, 2016; Okoye & Obi, 2019). In many cases, godfathers impose candidates with little regard for competence, thereby creating a patron-client governance structure where loyalty to the godfather supersedes public service obligations (Ezeibe et al., 2021).

The persistence of godfatherism has also fostered a political culture of impunity, where elected officials are beholden to unelected influencers rather than the electorate. Consequently, policy inconsistency, fiscal indiscipline, and weak service delivery have become hallmarks of governance in many Nigerian states (Adigwe & Aroh, 2022). While the Nigerian Constitution promotes democratic governance, the informal networks sustained by political godfathers continue to distort administrative efficiency, curtail political accountability, and obstruct reform (Ajayi & Oyelade, 2018).

The dynamics of political control in Nigeria are not static. Recent political developments suggest a growing resistance to the stranglehold of godfatherism, particularly among younger voters, civil society actors, and reform-minded politicians (Usman & Nwankwo, 2023). Judicial interventions, electoral reforms like the 2022 Electoral Act, and increasing public awareness are beginning to challenge the dominance of political godfathers, thereby opening a window for institutional strengthening and effective governance (Ibrahim & Alabi, 2024).

This study, therefore, seeks to critically examine the enduring influence of godfatherism on government administration in Nigeria, interrogate its consequences for democratic governance and development, and explore viable prospects for reform. It builds on contemporary scholarly discourses and empirical case studies to offer a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities embedded in Nigeria's political-administrative system.



1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite over two decades of uninterrupted democratic governance, Nigeria continues to grapple with weak institutions, policy inconsistency, and administrative inefficiency—issues that are frequently traced to the pervasive influence of political godfatherism. While democracy ideally guarantees political competition, merit-based leadership, and citizen-centered governance, the Nigerian experience often reflects a hijacked process where political godfathers manipulate party primaries, sponsor candidates, and exert undue control over elected officials once in power. This informal power arrangement creates a dual accountability system where loyalty to political patrons often supersedes responsibility to the electorate and adherence to constitutional norms.

The consequences are far-reaching: public institutions are frequently staffed based on loyalty rather than competence; public resources are diverted to sustain patron-client networks; and policy decisions are shaped by personal interests rather than developmental priorities. Such practices hinder effective service delivery, weaken institutional autonomy, and reinforce a culture of impunity and political stagnation. Even reform-minded leaders often find themselves constrained by the interests of their political benefactors, thereby limiting their capacity to pursue transformative agendas. Although recent reforms, such as the amended Electoral Act of 2022 and increased civic engagement, suggest a growing resistance to the influence of godfathers, the problem remains deeply embedded in Nigeria's political and administrative culture. Yet, existing scholarly and policy discourses have not fully addressed the evolving patterns of godfatherism or their nuanced impact on government performance at different levels of administration.

This study therefore seeks to interrogate the extent to which godfatherism affects effective government administration in Nigeria, identify the systemic and institutional weaknesses that enable it, and explore potential reforms and strategies for curbing its influence in order to enhance democratic governance and sustainable development.

1.2. Research questions

1. How does political godfatherism influence the appointment and performance of public officials in Nigeria's public administration system?
2. What are the major challenges that godfatherism poses to transparent governance and public service delivery in Nigeria?
3. What policy and institutional reforms can effectively mitigate the negative impact of godfatherism on public administration in Nigeria?



2.0 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptual Review.

Politics

Politics is one of the oldest and most widely studied concepts in the social sciences. It is central to the organization and functioning of societies and institutions. As a field of study and practice, politics involves the processes through which power is acquired, exercised, and distributed within a community. Politics governs not only governmental actions but also decision-making in various organizational and interpersonal contexts. In understanding governance issues like godfatherism in Nigeria, it is essential to grasp the foundational meaning and scope of politics.

According to Harold Lasswell (1936) “Politics is who gets what, when, and how.” This definition emphasizes the distributional aspect of politics — the allocation of resources and power. David Easton (1953) asserts that “Politics is the authoritative allocation of values for a society.” Easton views politics as a system through which societal values and resources are authoritatively distributed. For Max Weber (1919), “Politics is the striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state.” Weber focuses on power dynamics, recognizing the struggle inherent in political activity. Bernard Crick (1962) added that “Politics is the way in which free societies are governed”. Crick highlights politics as a civil mechanism for managing diversity and conflict in society. Politics can be analyzed through various lenses—normative, empirical, and critical. Academically, the discussion of politics spans several dimensions:

Power and Authority: Politics revolves around power — the ability to influence others — and authority — the legitimate use of that power. Scholars like Weber and Hannah Arendt have extensively explored these themes, stressing the role of legitimate rule and the consent of the governed.

State and Governance: The state is often seen as the primary arena of politics. Politics defines how institutions are structured, how laws are made, and how public policies are executed. Public administration is thus a practical extension of politics, where decisions are implemented by bureaucracies.

Conflict and Consensus: Politics involves managing conflict and building consensus. As society comprises diverse interests, politics is necessary for negotiation, compromise, and decision-making. This view supports democratic ideals where political processes allow for pluralism and participation.



Public vs. Private Sphere: Politics is traditionally confined to the public domain—government, law, and policy—but modern scholarship recognizes its influence in private and informal settings, such as within families, corporations, and even religious institutions.

Political Culture and Behavior: The way citizens engage with politics—voting, protesting, lobbying—is influenced by political culture. This includes values, beliefs, and attitudes about authority and governance. In Nigeria, for example, the persistence of godfatherism reflects deep-seated cultural and institutional patterns.

Global and Comparative Politics: Politics is also studied across borders. Comparative political analysis helps understand how different systems function and why some political practices (like godfatherism) persist in certain contexts due to weak institutions, corruption, or elite capture.

Conclusively, Politics, as a multifaceted concept, underpins the structure and operation of all forms of organized society. From scholarly definitions to academic discourse, politics is fundamentally about power, governance, and decision-making. Understanding politics is critical for analyzing governance challenges, including godfatherism in Nigeria, where informal power structures significantly influence public administration and democratic development.

Godfatherism

Godfatherism in Nigeria refers to a political arrangement where influential individuals—often wealthy elites, former political leaders, or power brokers—use their economic resources, political networks, and social capital to determine who gets access to political power. These individuals, known as *political godfathers*, sponsor and install loyal protégés (often called *godsons*) into political offices in return for control, loyalty, and access to state resources.

In this context, godfatherism is not merely mentorship or party leadership, but a deeply entrenched clientelist relationship that undermines democratic principles, electoral competition, and institutional autonomy. Key Characteristics of Nigerian Godfatherism includes the imposition of candidates. Godfathers often manipulate internal party primaries and elections to impose their preferred candidates, bypassing popular democratic processes.

Patronage and Loyalty: Political godsons are expected to repay their godfathers through political favors, financial kickbacks, contracts, or continued political allegiance.

Control of Public Resources: Once in office, godsons may divert public funds to maintain the influence of their sponsors, often at the expense of public service delivery.



Threats to Democratic Institutions: The authority of electoral bodies, political parties, and the judiciary can be undermined when godfathers interfere in elections or governance. Several scholars have defined godfatherism in relation to Nigeria's political realities:

According to Olarinmoye (2008) defines political godfatherism as "a situation where a powerful individual uses his influence to determine electoral outcomes, often in exchange for loyalty and the opportunity to control state resources indirectly." Omobowale and Olutayo (2007) describe it as "an informal political process whereby influential individuals determine the occupants of elective positions through coercion, manipulation, and financial inducement." Ikelegbe (2006) notes that godfatherism involves "a manipulative political relationship in which a political elite wields immense influence over the electoral choices of the masses and the decisions of elected officials."

In Nigeria, godfatherism is a symptom of weak political institutions, high poverty levels, and a culture of personalized politics. It thrives in environments where political office is viewed as a means to accumulate wealth and distribute patronage, rather than as a platform for public service. The practice has led to: Electoral violence and voter suppression, Political instability and intra-party conflicts and Erosion of public trust in governance

Historical Evolution of Godfatherism in Nigeria

Godfatherism as a political practice in Nigeria did not emerge overnight; it has evolved in tandem with Nigeria's political development—from the colonial period through successive republics—reflecting the country's socio-political dynamics and challenges.

During the colonial period, political power was centralized around colonial administrators and traditional rulers who acted as intermediaries between the British government and local populations. While formal "godfatherism" as known today was not explicit, patron-client relations existed within local power structures. Early Nigerian politicians relied heavily on elite patronage networks to mobilize support, especially in the ethnically segmented political landscape of the First Republic (1960–1966) and Political leaders like Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe wielded significant influence in their regions, mentoring protégés and controlling political appointments—an embryonic form of godfatherism.

First and Second Republics (1960–1966; 1979–1983)

The First Republic saw political parties deeply rooted in ethnic and regional affiliations. Influential party leaders operated as godfathers within their regions, controlling candidate selections and state resources. During the Second Republic, political godfatherism became more visible. Wealthy businessmen and former military officers began sponsoring politicians. For example, In the Western Region, wealthy elites influenced party politics and elections.



More so, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) also saw elite manipulation of political processes, using patronage to secure loyalty. However, political instability and military coups interrupted democratic governance, stalling the institutionalization of democratic norms and allowing godfatherism to flourish unchecked.

Under military regimes, (1984–1999) political godfatherism was less visible publicly due to the suspension of democratic politics. However, informal networks persisted. Military leaders acted as political godfathers by handpicking successors or controlling political appointments behind the scenes. More so, the transition programs to civilian rule in the early 1990s were manipulated by powerful military and civilian elites who sponsored favored candidates, foreshadowing godfatherism's entrenchment in the Fourth Republic.

The return to democracy in 1999 marked the most visible and institutionalized phase of godfatherism in Nigeria. Several factors contributed (1) multiparty democracy increased political competition but also intensified elite competition (2) Wealthy political godfathers leveraged financial resources to dominate party structures and elections and (3) The weakness of democratic institutions (e.g., judiciary, electoral commission) made it difficult to challenge godfatherism.

Notable examples include; Anambra State (2003), Chris Uba, a wealthy political godfather, allegedly orchestrated the kidnapping of Governor Chris Ngige, his godson, after Ngige resisted Uba's control. This case brought national attention to the dangers of godfatherism. Again, Lagos State Bola Tinubu is often cited as a political godfather who has influenced the election of multiple governors, consolidating political control over the state. Other states like Rivers, Delta, and Enugu have witnessed similar patterns, where godfathers sponsor candidates, control party machinery, and demand loyalty.

With increasing democratization, godfatherism has become more complex and network-based, involving coalitions of elites rather than single patrons. Social media and public awareness have increased scrutiny of godfathers, but the practice remains pervasive. Political godfatherism now extends beyond elections into legislative and judicial appointments, influencing governance at all levels. The historical evolution of godfatherism in Nigeria reveals its deep roots in patronage, elite competition, and weak democratic institutions. From the First Republic's regional power brokers to the multi-elite networks of the Fourth Republic, godfatherism has morphed but remains a persistent challenge to Nigeria's democratic consolidation and effective public administration.



Effective public Administration

Effective public administration goes beyond mere implementation of government policies—it encompasses transparency, accountability, responsiveness, **and** performance orientation in public service delivery. In Nigeria's context, it also requires institutional resilience against corruption, politicization, and inefficiency. Key dimensions & recent developments includes the establishment of the Efficiency Unit (2015–2018) within the Ministry of Finance was a strategic response to wastage and inefficiency.

The unit reviewed procurement and spending processes to promote value-for-money and integrity in expenditures, the Bureau of Public Service Reforms (BPSR), which dates back to 1999, has intensified its efforts recently through initiatives like cadre reviews, performance contracts, and advocacy of Servicomp—a service-compact tool fostering accountability and citizen-centered service across MDAs, Reforms like the Treasury Single Account (TSA) and biometric audits by Kaduna and Bayelsa States illustrate a crackdown on ghost workers and leakages (e.g., Kaduna's recovery of ₦24.7 billion and Bayelsa's sizeable salary bill cuts under Governor Dickson) . At the local and state levels, procurement reforms (like Edo State's Public Procurement Agency) have emphasized **transparency and value-for-money** in public contracting

Cases of Politics of Godfatherism in the Nigerian political space

The Wike–Fubara conflict exemplifies the typical lifecycle of a political godfather–protégé dynamic in Nigeria. Former governor Nyesom Wike hand-picked and supported Siminalayi Fubara's rise, expecting continued loyalty and influence in Rivers State's governance. Wike's control extended across appointments, legislative alignments, and executive decisions, mirroring analytics in Machiavellian political theories. Fubara's bid for autonomy triggered fierce backlash: his allies were ousted, impeachment attempts followed, the legislature split, and governance stagnated, crippling public service delivery and deepening political violence. Analysts suggest that this is symptomatic of patronage-driven politics, where godfathers hold overwhelming sway over democratic institutions.

In March 2025, President Tinubu declared a state of emergency, suspending Fubara and dissolving the legislature—an extraordinary move that critics argue establishes a dangerous precedent in federal-state relations. This intervention underscores how godfatherism can provoke institutional override when local power struggles threaten national stability.

Chris Uba, a powerful PDP backer, cemented Chris Ngige's 2003 election victory through campaign financing and a formal “declaration of loyalty” that granted Uba control over appointments and contracts. This arrangement typifies the contractual godfatherism in



Nigerian politics. When Ngige attempted to assert autonomy, Uba allegedly coerced his resignation—reportedly at gunpoint—and utilized the pliant state assembly to formalize the ouster. The judiciary later overturned both events: annulling the election and Ngige’s forced resignation, restoring democratic order yet laying bare the fragility of governance under godfather rule.

Institutionalized Godfatherism

Bola Tinubu is widely recognized as a consummate political godfather. Following his two terms as governor (1999–2007), he established a robust patronage network—handpicking successive governors (Fashola, Ambode, Sanwo-Olu) within the APC and strengthening party structures to secure centralized influence beyond Lagos

Succession Control and Political Discipline

Tinubu’s system is described as a “machine politics” model, exerting top-down control to enforce loyalty. Protégés who deviate—like Ambode—are swiftly removed or marginalized, illustrating how entrenched godfatherism undermines internal party democracy

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two interrelated theories: Clientelism Theory and Elite Theory, both of which provide a conceptual lens for understanding the dynamics of godfatherism in Nigerian politics and its impact on government administration.

Clientelism, as a form of patron-client relationship, is characterized by an unequal exchange between a powerful patron and a dependent client, where goods or favors are exchanged for political loyalty (Scott, 1972). In the Nigerian context, godfatherism reflects this dynamic, with political godfathers providing financial resources, access to political networks, and electoral support to candidates (the clients) in return for future loyalty, control over public resources, and policy influence once the client assumes office (Lemarchand & Legg, 2015). This theory is especially relevant for analyzing how administrative decisions are compromised by informal obligations. It explains why political appointments, budgetary allocations, and policy implementation often reflect the interests of individual patrons rather than broader developmental goals. The godfather’s expectation of patronage return often leads to institutional inefficiency, corruption, and weakened public accountability (Aiyede, 2016; Okoye & Obi, 2019).

On the other hand, Elite Theory posits that political power in any society is concentrated in the hands of a small group of elites who make decisions that shape public policy, often to serve their own interests rather than the public good (Mosca, 1939; Mills, 1956).



In the Nigerian political system, godfathers represent a segment of this elite class who wield disproportionate influence over democratic processes and governance outcomes. This theory helps explain the entrenchment of godfatherism in Nigeria's political landscape, as power is continuously recycled among a narrow elite class through informal control of political parties, state resources, and electoral processes. The influence of these elites often overrides institutional mechanisms meant to ensure accountability and democratic governance (Ajayi & Oyelade, 2018; Ibrahim & Alabi, 2024).

Together, Clientelism Theory and Elite Theory offer a comprehensive theoretical lens through which the persistence and consequences of godfatherism can be critically examined. While clientelism explains the transactional and personalistic nature of political relationships in Nigeria, elite theory situates these dynamics within broader structures of power, exclusion, and institutional capture. Applying these theories allows for a deeper understanding of both the systemic problems and the possibilities for reform in Nigerian governance.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study approach will be used, supplemented with quantitative data where applicable. Key informant interviews with public officials, political analysts, civil society leaders for secondary data, the use of government policy documents, media reports, audit reports, and academic publications were adopted. Purposive sampling of 3–5 ministries/agencies across different states with a history of politically motivated appointments.

4.0. LITERAL ANALYSES AND DISCOURSES

The phenomenon of godfatherism in Nigerian politics has remained a persistent challenge to democratic governance, political accountability, and institutional integrity. It refers to a system where influential political elites, often with economic power and social clout, sponsor or impose candidates in elections and subsequently expect loyalty, control, or returns. This pattern, rooted in patrimonialism and neopatrimonial state theory, subverts democratic norms, breeds authoritarian tendencies within parties, and distorts the policy-making process. This discourse interrogates the roots, structures, and implications of godfatherism in Nigeria, drawing on empirical cases such as Rivers (Wike vs. Fubara), Anambra (Chris Uba vs. Ngige), and Lagos (Tinubu's political dominance).

Godfatherism in Nigeria is not a post-independence creation. During the First Republic, regional power brokers such as Obafemi Awolowo in the West and Ahmadu Bello in the North exercised control over their political base. However, the phenomenon gained notoriety with the return to civil rule in 1999, as state capture by moneyed elites and former military rulers became more explicit (Omotola, 2007).



The privatization of the democratic process became evident in the manner political parties were structured—not as platforms for ideological contestation, but as vehicles for electoral investment and reward. The proliferation of political godfathers is a consequence of weak party structures, weak rule of law, and absence of internal democracy.

Case Studies: Empirical Illustrations

1. Anambra State – Chris Uba and Chris Ngige (2003)

The Anambra crisis exemplifies godfatherism at its most coercive. Chris Uba, a PDP chieftain, facilitated Ngige’s gubernatorial victory and extracted a written oath of allegiance, demanding total control of government appointments and finances. When Ngige resisted, Uba reportedly used police officers to abduct the governor and force his resignation (Human Rights Watch, 2007). This instance highlighted how informal pacts overrode constitutional mandates, and how the judiciary eventually emerged as a corrective institution.

2. Lagos State – Bola Ahmed Tinubu

Bola Tinubu has been described as the architect of modern godfatherism in Lagos and southwestern Nigeria. Following his tenure as governor from 1999 to 2007, he engineered the emergence of successive governors through tight control of party structures, most notably in the Action Congress and later the APC. His influence over state politics remains unparalleled, with allegations of controlling appointments, revenue-generating agencies, and contract allocations (Adebanwi, 2016). Unlike Uba, Tinubu’s model represents institutionalized godfatherism, operating within party politics under the guise of strategic leadership.

3. Rivers State – Wike vs. Siminalayi Fubara

In a more recent case, Nyesom Wike, after serving eight years as governor of Rivers State, was instrumental in installing Sim Fubara as his successor. However, the relationship soured when Fubara sought administrative independence. The political conflict escalated into legislative splits, violence, and eventual federal intervention in 2024, illustrating how the breakdown of godfather-protégé alliances can undermine governance and threaten constitutional order (Sahara Reporters, 2024).



Implications of Godfatherism on Governance and Democracy

1. Undermining Democratic Institutions

Godfatherism weakens institutions such as the legislature, judiciary, and electoral commissions. It prioritizes loyalty over competence and fosters a culture where elected officials are accountable to patrons, not the public (Ibeanu, 2010).

2. Threat to Internal Party Democracy

Political godfathers often hijack party primaries, eliminating meritocratic candidacy. As a result, elections become mere formalities for legitimizing predetermined outcomes (Ojo, 2012). This discourages credible individuals from participating in politics, reinforcing elite domination.

3. Governance Stagnation and Corruption

Protégés beholden to godfathers frequently divert state resources to reward their political benefactors, leading to poor public investment and service delivery. Where conflicts arise—as in Rivers or Anambra—governance is paralyzed and civil unrest may ensue.

4. Judicial and Electoral Consequences

While the judiciary has occasionally served as a corrective force—as in Peter Obi's restoration in Anambra—its capacity to consistently challenge entrenched power networks remains limited due to political interference and delayed adjudication.

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Godfatherism remains a systemic challenge to Nigeria's democratic development. It perpetuates a vicious cycle of elite dominance, institutional erosion, and public disenchantment with governance. Recommendations must target:

1. Electoral finance regulation to reduce the influence of wealthy patrons.
2. Internal party reforms to ensure transparent primaries and candidate selection.
3. Strengthening judicial independence to provide credible redress for undemocratic practices.
4. Civic education and citizen mobilization to challenge godfatherism through voter awareness.



Competing Interest

The author declare that no conflicting interest exist in this paper.

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