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An assessment of leadership role of the political office-holders in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century at the Nigerian local government level: A theoretical perspective

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Effective political leadership is essential to facilitate successful attainment of public goals. The focal point of this paper is to assess the leadership role of political office-holders towards achieving the aims and objectives of local government vis-à-vis prospects and challenges. It reviews the conceptual issues related to leadership with reference to Nigerian Local Government; and examines the contemporary theories justifying the existence and need for local government. Data are gathered both from primary and secondary sources. This study appraises the performance of political office-holders using the highlighted objectives within the theoretical perspective as parameters. At the end, this paper analyses salient issues; as well as providing recommendations as regards political leadership development at local level.

Key words: Leadership, governance, political office-holders, local government.

INTRODUCTION

In Africa, leadership has been identified as one of the major problems militating against growth and development in all sectors of the economy and levels of government. The need for leadership in any organization is very essential. This is because organizations exist with stated objectives and leaders are ‘machineries’ for achieving such stated objectives. Organisational goals will remain unrealistic without a ‘designated individual’ known as leader. As a result, leaders are ‘central instruments’ to any organization. Success or failure of an organization lies in the hand of a leader.

Nigerian Local Government, as the scope of this study, is a third-tier of governmental administration; it is a formal organisation with stated objectives to provide governance at the local level. To further define this scope of study, this paper adopts the definition of local government given by the 1976 local government reform: “government at local level exercised through elected representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the councils substantial control over local affairs as well as staff, 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....”

From scholarly observations, leaders can be typified into four forms in Nigerian Local Government Administration. These are: Political Leaders – elected representatives such as chairman and councillors; Executive Leaders – political appointees such as supervisory councillors, special advisers, e.t.c; Administrative Leaders – top careerists; and Traditional Leaders – Kings, Chiefs e.t.c. Political and Executive leaders are herein referred to as Political Office-Holders, and in-turn, they are the...
'government' at the local level. Therefore, this paper takes political and executive leaders as samples to be studied. The raison d’être is that: political office-holders are citizens’ representative in government; they are the chief accounting and executive officers, thus local government administration revolves around them; they make decisions, plan and vest duties on administrative officers; as well, the traditional leaders exercise their legitimate powers with the consent of the political office-holders. In connection to the above discussion, political office-holders are 'central instruments' and 'machineries' for attaining the goals and objectives of local government. Hence, the leadership role of political office-holders is a major ‘barometer’ for measuring or assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of local government in Nigeria.

In line with the above, the aim of this paper is to examine the role of political office-holders in Nigerian local government; identify their contributions to local development; and assess their roles within the theoretical framework which justifies the existence and need for local government. In order to achieve these objectives, relevant topics are discussed in the following sections and information is gathered both from primary and secondary sources.

METHODOLOGY

Typology of this research work is qualitatively descriptive; it employed both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary source adopted interview method using Focus Group Discussion for data collection. A total number of Ten (10) learned people of forthright views were interviewed; who were randomly selected from different strata of the society. Two (2) academicians in the field of Administration and Social Sciences; Two (2) Grassroots Politicians; Two (2) Top Administrative Officers in Local Government Service; Two (2) Local Residents; and Two (2) Traditional Chiefs. The content of data gathered was properly analysed. The secondary source included review of books, journals, and information from internet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of local government in Nigeria

Local government as a concept has attracted discourses from many scholars with varying degree of specificity within the world of learning and practising world of administration. Presently, there is a glut of research efforts on repositioning local government in Nigeria. An appraisal of the various research works reveals that local government as a major institution of development is politically hampered by higher levels of government. However, its needs and existence are, as well, still justified within the anatomy of political systems all over the world.

It was asserted that scholarly interest in local government encouraged both the 1976 Local Government Reform which provides bedrock for local government administration in Nigeria and the deliberate effort of government to popularize this institution. According to Muttalib and Khan (1982), “Local government is an ancient institution with a concept of administration having a direct bearing with provision of services to local clients of the state. It is multi-dimensional, and is politically expressed as governing institution presiding over a specific local sub-division of a state.”

Kuklinsky (1971) views local government as a “democratic institution anticipating a wide array of discretionary powers which makes it legally and politically responsive to the needs of the clients within its jurisdiction”. Byrne (1984), a British scholar, defined local government as a self-government involving the administration of public affairs in each locality by a body of representatives of local community; although subject to the central government, it still possesses considerable amount of responsibility.

Synopsising from the above definitions, local government is an institution presiding over a locality or sub-division of a state with devolutionary powers concerned with the administration of public affairs of such locality, by this means, responding to the needs of its people and environment, although subjected to inspectoral supervision of the state, nonetheless still possesses a considerable degree of responsibility and autonomy. Remarkably, Nigerian Local governments make out with the conceptual definition in terms of structure, not in practice.

In Nigeria, local government has been a living subject prior to colonization. Prior to the colonization, the various traditional systems could be regarded as forms of local government, and it was upon these traditional systems the colonialists built their colonial system of indirect rule due to expediency. Oyediran (1988) classified the major studies on Nigerian local politics and administration into three groups, namely: Official and semi-official; descriptive; and comparative.

The official and semi-official studies were early works on local government before the introduction of representative local government in 1950. The studies focused majorly on the principle of indirect rule and native administration with little interest on the functions of the government. The studies were carried out by early crop of Nigerian elites who were trained to believe that local government was essential. These elites occupied state posts and they were involved in the formation and operations of local government as formal institutions from 1900 to 1952. These studies were however criticized on the ground that it emphasized on the system not the process, and hence, it does not reach deep level in
Descriptive studies predominated the 1950s and 1960s (Oyediran, 1988). These studies were categorized into two: Legality and Historical Studies. Legalistic studies concentrate on laws governing the representative local government in the decolonization and early post-colonial era and as it affects the democratic nature of the new system, its structure, functions, sources and methods of financing amongst others. Historical studies, on the other hand, were detailed on local studies mostly by historians of Nigerian origin. Some of them questioned early discourses which presented indirect rule as a system rather than a concept of local government. The studies were skeptical about many erstwhile generalizations on local government especially under colonialism, and revealed the severe dearth in knowledge in the study area. These studies further emphasized the variety of changes and conflicts between institutions, roles and individuals that resulted from changes in the political and administrative structures at local level. However, these provided little insights into the future structuring principles of Nigerian local government.

Comparative studies on Nigerian local government compare democratic tendencies of other advanced countries with the institutions of local government in Nigeria. Bello-Imam (1983) is of the view that most studies adopt this approach. However, Gboyega (1987) explains that these comparative studies might not have adequately recognized the influence of political values on the functioning of local government units, while some lacked supportive evidence for their opious generalizations.

All these studies on local government in Nigeria brought about nation-wide reform in 1976. This reform was the product of a nation-wide cross-fertilization of ideas which began in 1975. The reform set a clear landmark for local government in Nigeria. The reform offers a comprehensive definition of local government in Nigeria. The 1984 Dasuki reform preceded that of 1976 due to neglect of its recommendations by politicians of the Nigerian second republic and later in 1988, there was civil service reform with special interests on local government administration therefore ushering in presidential system of local government in Nigeria. Remarkably therefore, local government has been a major area of interest for all military juntas in Nigeria. Military governments sought to stimulate democratic self-government and encourage initiative and leadership potential at grassroots level. However, in real practice, the fact that those military governments determined where local government should be created, what they should do in terms of functions and responsibilities has negated the exercise of democratic self-government. In view of that, the term 'local government' was not obtainable under military administration; the system of administration can otherwise be termed local administration.

Also, it is believed that government at local level would enjoy operational autonomy under a democratic government. On the contrary, it was under the civilian regime that state governments despised the constitutional and reform provisions on local government. The autonomy of local government was tactically withdrawn, as various studies on Nigerian local government revealed that the state edicts following the 1976 reforms made local government just as an apparatus of the state governments. In addition, crucial roles being played in local government administration by state agencies in charge of personnel and budget approval further limited the autonomy of local government in Nigeria. Contemporarily, different styles and models of local government administration are operated by various state governments in Nigeria, and hence, it has cancelled out the uniformity of the local government system in Nigeria.

Above all, the studies on Nigerian local governments have often been on local politics or more often a direct advocacy for local autonomy. However, much of the analysis of local government lacks adequate theoretical insights; this has therefore underlined their inability to explain the dynamics of local government and propose viable strategies for overcoming its problems. As a final point, the concept of local government in Nigeria has, but not been fully, plotted into its federal arrangement.

Leadership at the local government level

The concept of leadership has been defined by several scholars. It is a phenomenon in all spheres of life. As rightly observed, many scholars have demonstrated their intellects on this concept, by so doing, definitions exhibit variations. However, as many as the literatures are, there appears to be more ‘disagreement’ than ‘agreement’ (Erero, 1995). Nevertheless, the disagreement in the various literatures centres on the question of who can be rightly regarded as a leader, a mere ‘head’ or ‘office holder’ and their distinctions.

In the field of management, scholars have argued on whether leaders are born or made. Leaders, who are born, are referred to the charismatic type of leaders who possessed both incredible and fantastic natural gifts in leading irrespective of any daunted situation. On the other hands, behavioural scientists have dispelled the notion that leaders are born. These scientists affirm positively that an individual can be best trained to become a leader. However, scholars have accepted the two positions that leaders are both born and made, given the instance that a person born with leadership traits needs to undergo training so as to become a better leader.

Social scientists asserted that two types of leaders exist in all institutions namely: Official and Unofficial (Stogdill, 1948). A distinction could be made between the two types. On one hand, the unofficial tends to be intermittent, becoming active at times of crisis and
quires in more placid circumstances. On the other hand, official leader is an established person who designs, controls and motivates the subordinates to work towards goals which are regarded by organization as desirable. Political office-holder is an official type of leader; it is an ‘engine’ of governmental organization in Nigerian administrative setting.

Leadership is a situational factor because persons who are leaders in one situation may not necessarily be leaders in other situations. Therefore, the leader of a group is the genus of person which the particular group in its particular predicament requires. Hence, leader occupies a position of ‘centrality’ in the focal point for the activity of his group.

Strategically, leaders must be able to analyze their environment to determine how best to use the existing resources and capabilities of the organisation. For this reason, a political office-holder must be able to create his management style; identify organisational objectives and seek to perform them creditably; plan and organise well; direct its resources in most scientific manner desirable; and provide a democratic leadership which is built on the acceptance of the concept of authority and making decisions amidst other factors in a democratic way.

Leadership at local level needs not to be authoritarian. The understanding of local politics and governance becomes imperative. This is expected to make easy the political and socio-economic development. This paper will therefore look at the contemporary theories justifying the existence and objectives of local government in Nigerian political arrangement. It shall, in-turn, appraise the leadership role of political office-holders in achieving the aims and objectives of local government vis-à-vis prospects and challenges.

Theoretical framework

According to Iyoha (1992), “a theory is a set of ideas explaining a phenomenon”. Advancing this definition further, theory does not only explain, it tests and evaluates relationships between variables with the aim of providing a set of structuring principles to govern the translation of hypothetical statements into practices. Mackenzie (1961) had, at a point, declared that “there is no theory of local government”. However, Cockburn (1977) argued that “there is a collection of theories or ideas about the relationship between individuals and local authority; about the way in which services ought to be provided; and about the division of labour in politics generally, as well as views on the way in which decisions are taken and policies are made in government”.

With reference to Africa, Ola (1984) asserted that there was no theory of local government distinct from the theory of government due to absence of discussion and debate on local government, not until recently when there is growth in the debate on local government. Nevertheless, the modern debates have made available a number of theoretical perspectives. These are: (a) Localists’ Approach; (b) Public Choice Framework; (c) Dual State Thesis; and (d) Local State and Social Relations Approach.

Localists’ approach, which draws largely from the pluralist tradition, is currently legitimized as an official ideology of local government. This approach has built a case for local government on the following bases: (i) Promotion of Grassroots Democracy; (ii) Local Development as a contribution to National Development; (iii) Localness of local government facilitates accessibility, responsiveness and political accountability; (iv) Local Freedom and Action; (v) Its potential for promoting national unity through efficiency of administration (Roberts, 1997; Op.Cit, pp 13).

Public Choice Framework exposed the weaknesses in representative democracy and existing bureaucracies, and eulogises market mechanisms as the optimal device for decision making and allocation of goods. This theory exemplified the scenario in local government administration in Nigeria. The existing democratic arrangement is regarded as a poor predictor of citizens’ preferences and demands because the public expectation is built-up by political office-holders compounded by pressures from sectional interest groups. The bureaucrats, on the other hands, have also abandoned the collective goals in preference to ‘self-interested’ goals. According to Stoker (1988), “these weaknesses in representative democracy and public bureaucracy underline the tendency for local government to be inefficient and wasteful”. The problems of local government are much internal than what was suggested by localists’ view, with higher levels of government. Having diagnosed the local government system, this theoretical perspective therefore encourages competition among local government bureaus; places emphasis on public-private partnership; and provides framework within which acceptable degree of local participation reflect in the decision-making and allocation of goods.

Dual State Thesis, as advocated by the propounders (Cawson and Saunders, 1983), examines the state intervention at centre and local levels. This theoretical perspective explains that there should be an open democratic or competitive struggle focused on social rights and needs at local level. Stoker elucidated further that this specificity provides the parameters for understanding the constraints within which the local-state operates, including the intricacies that characterize central-local relations.

The local state and social relations build upon the work of Cockburn (1977). It explains local government in its broader socio-economic context. According to Cockburn (1977), in his capitalist’s view, “sees local government as a subject to central government”. Hence, local government is a key apparatus of the state. This theory sees local government as part of the whole state which is
relatively autonomous with their primary responsibilities. Local government is, therefore, an agency through which the state carries out its functions and nevertheless, specializes in relationship with local citizens at local level. Thus, local government has a dual responsibility. It is nationally responsible, in the sense that, aggregate of local development is national development. On the other hand, it is locally responsible, in the sense that, “local government is a face-to-face affair and its officials represent the government to the ‘clients’ population”.

On a final note, the four theoretical perspectives, viewed in this paper, have adequately provided insights into the objectives of local government (that is, what an ideal local government should stand for). Synoptically, the objectives are to: promote grassroots democracy; enhance local development thereby contributing to national development; facilitate accessibility, responsiveness and political accountability due to its localness; win public loyalty through its capacity; promote national unity via cooperative relationships with other institutions of governance; ensure efficient administrative system, thus bringing out effective service delivery; generate funds within its jurisdiction so as to enjoy operational and financial autonomies; and provide open democratic and competitive struggles focused on social rights and needs. This paper will therefore evaluate the leadership role of political office-holders in Nigerian Local Government Administration using the highlighted objectives as parameters. In other words, it is to examine how far the political office-holders have attempted to accomplish the stated objectives.

**Political office-holders and local government administration in Nigeria**

The crux of this paper is to assess the leadership character of the political office-holders (‘government’) in relation to the objectives of local government administration within the theoretical perspective. As highlighted in the preceding section, these objectives consist of some qualitative variables which will serve as tools to be used in carrying out the assessment.

Foremost, grassroots democracy and development are main philosophies behind the creation of local government. The content of the data gathered shows that there is poor understanding of local politics and development by political office-holders (Interview with Selected Individuals on “Grassroots Democracy and Development”, 2012). On grassroots democracy, election should be the mechanism for choosing candidates into public offices. Unfortunately, it was reported that Nigerian Local Government Administration has been managed mostly by sole-administrators and caretaker committee as against the elected representative council, thus rebuffing the prospect of citizens’ participation in the governance and administration of their local areas. Development, on the other hands, becomes uncertain in this situation where ‘social vehicles’ are not adequately fuelled and the ‘central instruments’ are not sophisticated. Political office-holders are politically and administratively encumbered by higher levels of government thus deterring governance at the local level.

Localness is a unique feature of local government which no other tier of government can be characterized with. This unique feature aids citizens’ accessibility to government and quick responsiveness of government to citizens’ needs. Two fundamental questions arouse here, first, are the political office-holders accessible by citizens for their needs? And, do they act in response to the citizens’ needs? The discussion reveals that government at local level is the most accessible due to its closeness to citizens, but responsiveness of government at this level is rated to be relatively ‘poor’ consequent upon limited resources, weak administrative system, sectional and political interests (Interview with Selected Individuals on “Localness of Local Government, Public Accessibility and Loyalty”, 2012). This poor responsiveness has invariably militated against the aim of winning public loyalty and confidence by the government at local level.

Examining the intra-local relation, discussants acknowledged to an ‘extent’ the fact that government at this level provides synergy for socio-cultural groups, community development associations, traditional and informal institutions in order to enhance governance. However, the inter-local relation is rated to be ‘very poor’ owing to the lack of inter-relationships among local governments in the area of social service administration and delivery (Interview with Selected Individuals on “Intra and Inter Local Government Relation”, 2012).

Social service delivery is a chief function of government at any level. In spite of all political and administrative constraints, the contributions of government at local level to social service are rated to be relatively ‘good’. Interviewees noted that government at local level engages in provision of socio-economic infrastructures such as health, education, agriculture, construction of roads and other domestic facilities (Interview with Selected Individuals on “Social Service Administration and Delivery at Local Level", 2012). The good contributions underline the institutional importance and relevance of local government in national growth and development.

On the issue of internal revenue generation, analysts noted that government at local level has failed to accomplish this key objective of local government administration as a result of poor tax administrative system, high reliance on revenue allocation from higher levels of government and state control (Interview with Selected Individuals on “Local Government and Revenue Generation System”, 2012). The poor status of tax administrative system at local level is caused by some factors. Among factors concerning the political office-holders, first, is that political office-holders seem bent on
imposing taxes on the citizens for political reason. It is believed that any local government that imposes taxes on citizens may not re-gain political support from them, and on the other hands, citizens would only want to enjoy public services and utilities without any input, while some citizens would like to pay taxes, but they will be skeptical of effective use of the tax-yield by the government. This depicts traditional political culture in the government (that is political office-holders) and the citizens. Other causal factors include: inefficient tax collection system, poor tax information and communication, uneconomic tax administration, corruption and mismanagement, as well as lack of effective penal codes on tax evaders. The state control also debilitates the revenue generation system at local level as noted by the respondents that some taxing areas assigned to local government have been usurped by the state; and the joint allocation system remains blurred; as well as the failure of state governments to disburse 10% of their internally generated revenue among their local governments. Moreover, the arguments on autonomy remain illogical, if local governments cannot look inward to raise larger percentage of their needed resources.

Just as it is in the Nigerian federation, interviewees noted perceptibly identity politics at local level (Interview with Selected Individuals on “Politics, Decision-making and Administration at Local Level”, 2012). Local affairs are influenced on the basis of nepotism and favouritism. These feats show in the kind and amount of decision made, services provided and prioritization of social needs and rights by the government at local level.

Conclusively, this section has attempted to examine the leadership role of political office-holders in Nigerian Local Government Administration vis-à-vis their prospects and challenges by indicating their levels of commitment against the each of the highlighted objectives of local government administration.

RECOMMENDATION

In this 21st century, more than 75% of the contemporary political office-holders at local level found themselves at the corridor of powers through a fortuitous combination of political circumstances; most of them do not have a blueprint or schema for governance. This paper recommends that any elected or appointed political office-holders should undergo leadership and management training prior to the commencement of their tenure in office. Such step is expected to acquaint them with adequate knowledge on governance and administration, as well as pragmatic approaches to solving management and societal problems.

Government at the local level is rated to be the most accessible by citizens for their needs. The paper recommends that such attribute should not be staved off, but complemented with quick responsiveness regardless of all odds. Moreover, in policy and project consideration, ‘public interest’ must supercede all other forms of interest. In this capacity, local government would gain public confidence and loyalty, as well as legitimacy.

While sustaining the cordial intra-local relation, this paper recommends that cooperative relationship should be established among local governments with the aim of building formidable grassroots development and efficient mobilization and utilization of available human and material resources. Local government must intensify effort in providing more services to its people; inspiring local communities and creating a better future for the people. In addition, there is need for overhauling of tax administrative system and advocate for direct revenue allocation from the federation account.

Effective political leadership is at the heart of effective democracy. Political office leadership are crucial to our shared vision for local governance – efficient, accountable, reliable and changing lives for the better. Concerted efforts must be geared towards ensuring that they are bold and ambitious leaders, equipped to tackle these challenges: reinvigorating local governance; ensuring strong democratic accountability; building civil society; making tough decisions amidst pressures; devolving power to local people; promoting fairness; and tackling inequality.

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