

**POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA:
ASSESSING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE FOURTH
REPUBLIC**

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Abstract

Institutions are the formal and informal rules that organise social, political and economic relations.. They are the systems of 'established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions. Political institutions are symbols of a nation's political system and they teach us about how politics work in a nation. The political system of Nigeria is based on freedom, equality and the citizen's participation viz political associations and parties. The politics takes place in a framework of a federal presidential representative democratic republic, whereby the President is both Head of State and Head of Government, in a multiparty system of government. Executive power is exercised by the government. Legislative power is vested in both the government and the two chambers of the National Assembly. The highest judicial arm of government in Nigeria is the Supreme Court of Nigeria. The Nigerian government institutional structure is made up of three tiers, which are the federal, state, and the local government. The three of them are involved in delivering dividends of democracy to the people. There are 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the country. Their functions are clearly spelt out in the Constitution. This paper has argued that the design of political institutions influences politics as it relates to Nigeria. The methodology adopted to prosecute this paper is qualitative based on historical, institutional and comparative inquiry.

KEYWORDS: *Local Government, Institutions, Governance, Reforms, Political Participation*

INTRODUCTION

Institutions are structures and mechanisms of social order and cooperation governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given human collectivity. Institutions are identified with a social purpose and permanence, transcending individual human lives and intentions, and with the making and enforcing of rules governing cooperative human behaviour. The term "institution" is commonly applied to customs and behaviour patterns important to a society, as well as to particular formal organizations of government and public service. As structures and mechanisms of social order among humans, institutions are one of the principal objects of study in the social sciences, including sociology, political science, and economics. Institutions are a central concern for law, the formal mechanism for political rule-making and enforcement. The creation and evolution of institutions is a primary topic for history (Hicks & Swank: 1992).

Government institution means any department, division, office, agency or a Ministry. Again, government institution means any federal government office established as an autonomous entity by a proclamation or regulations and fully or partially financed by government budget; included in the list.

A local government is a form of public administration which, in a majority of contexts, exists as the lowest tier of administration within a given state. The institutions of local government vary greatly between countries, and even where similar arrangements exist, the terminology often varies. The Nigerian government structure is made up of three tiers, which are the federal government, state government and the local government. The three of them are involved in delivering dividends of democracy to the people.

The role of local government is crucial for federal systems. First, local government is a key interface between civil society and the state. Then, local government has to be integrated into the complex structure of a federal system. The provisions of the 1999 constitution form the institutional framework for local government system today in Nigeria. It is important to note that the each successive creation of local governments beginning from 1976 has been done by federal military governments. Nigeria has 774 local government areas (L.G.As). Each local government area is

administered by a Local Government Council consisting of a chairman who is the Chief Executive of the LGA, and other elected members who are referred to as Councillors.

HISTORY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NIGERIA

The history of the modern local government in Nigeria as in other up-coming countries across the globe has been a highly complex one. Local Government is one of man's oldest institutions (Agbakoba & Ogbonna, 2004). The earliest form of Local governments existed in the form of clan and village meetings. In fact, democracy itself originated and developed along the lines of local governance initiatives in the ancient Greek city states. In other parts of the world, local governance was developed along the people's culture and expectations. Prior to colonization, there were in existence in most Africa enclaves, local administrative machineries founded upon traditional institutions.

In the area known as Nigeria today, the existing tribes that make up the geographical areas already had one form of local administration or the other. In Northern Nigeria, the Hausa/ Fulani practiced a highly centralized form of government with the Emir at the head as both the political and religious leader. The Emir however delegated his power to District heads (the *Magajis*) to oversee the districts that made up the emirates (Agbakoba & Ogbonna: 2004).

In the Western part of the country, the *Oba* firmly held power over towns. This power was delegated to the *Baale* who administered a town or village and paid royalties to the *Oba* at specified times of the year. The Igbos of the Eastern part however were republican and egalitarian in nature. That notwithstanding, there were still in existence, the '*Ohaneze*' (an assembly of men) who sat in the village square to take decisions on behalf of the people. Some parts of the east still had village heads and *Igwes* who administered a particular town with the advice of the council of elders.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that the system of governance at grassroots level did not come with the attainment of Nigeria's independence in 1960. It also preceded the coming and amalgamation of Nigeria. Adeyemi (2019) has argued that Local governments have always been an integral part of various societies and human communities that became known as Nigeria with amalgamation of 1914 by Sir

Frederick. He further explained that in pre-colonial times it revolved around the traditional authority of each locality, it was acknowledged and respected, and since then, it has passed through different levels of restructuring from Native Authority System (under the indirect rule system) to Divisional, District and Council Manager-ship, as well as a system of local government, introduced through the 1976 reform. Adeyemi also pointed it out that since the introduction of 1976 reform, local governments in Nigeria have become a uniform administrative structure (Adeyemi, 2019).

A number of reasons have been given for the evolution and creation of Local Governments. These range from political, social and economic reasons. These reasons have been captured by section 7(2) of the Nigerian Constitution in the following words:

The person authorized by law to prescribe the area over which a Local Government council may exercise authority shall –

(a) define such an area as clearly as practicable (b) ensure, to the extent to which it may be reasonably justifiable, that in defining such area regard is paid to (i) the common interest of the community in the area (ii) traditional association of the community, and (iii) administrative convenience (Agbakoba & Ogbonna: 2004).

Briefly, the following are the purpose for the creation of Local Governments:

a. To bring governance closer to the people; b. For administrative convenience; c. To engender development; d. To preserve heritage and common interest of the people.

The evolution of local government administration in the country must be seen in the context of regionalism. The old regions of the East, West and North, as a result of different levels of development traversed different paths to strengthen their systems of local administration. An analysis of the evolution of local government administration prior to the major 1976 local government reforms is in NCEMA (1990) and Gboyega (1983). The 1976 reform represented a fundamental change in the development of local government in Nigeria. For the first time, the country was given a common, single-tier structure of local government in place of the different structures of various states (Agbakoba & Ogbonna: 2004).

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS.

Local Government, which can simply be described as government at the local level has been defined by various scholars in different ways. A Local Government is a political and administrative unit that is empowered by law to administer a specified locality. It is also a governing institution which has authority over a sub national territorially defined area; in federal systems, a sub state territorially defined area. Local Government's authority springs from its elected basis, a factor which also facilitates considerable variation in its behaviour both between and within countries. Again, local government can also be defined as a political administration of the smallest subdivisions of a country's territory and population (Agbakoba & Ogbonna: 2004).

At this juncture, we want to point out that whereas the term, "local government" has been defined in different ways; this development actually depends on the orientation and experience of its users. For example, Awa (1981) infers that local government is "a political authority set up by a nation or state as a subordinate authority for the purpose of dispersing or decentralizing political power".

For Wraith (1984), local government is seen as "the act of decentralizing power, which may take the form of deconcentration or devolution. Deconcentration involves delegation of authority to field units of the same department and devolution on the other hand refers to a transfer of authority to local government units or special statutory bodies such as school boards for instance. From this perceptive, we can see local government as a lesser power in the national polity. It is an administrative agency through which control and authority relates to the people at the grassroots or periphery (Adeyemo: 2005).

According to Emezi, (1984) local government is a "system of local administration under local communities that are organized to maintain law and order, provide some limited range of social amenities, and encourage cooperation and participation of inhabitants towards the improvement of their conditions of living. It provides the community with formal organizational framework which enables them to conduct their affairs effectively for the general good".

Deriving from the definitions given by Awa, Wraith and Emezi these are some colonial underpinnings. For instance, Emezi emphasized more on maintenance of law and order and provision of limited range of social services. In essence, the conceptual view of local government is basically a function of space and time factor. For example in colonial time, native administration was primarily established for maintenance of law and order. With the emergence of independence, emphasis shifted from law enforcement to the provision of social services (Adeyemo: 2005).

After the 1976 Local Government reform in Nigeria, Local Government became defined as *government at local level exercised through 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 to ensure, through devolution of these functions to these councils and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized* (Reforms Guidelines, 1976).

The United Nations Office for Public Administration defines local government as a *political subdivision of a nation or (in a federal system) State, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs including the powers to impose taxes or to exact labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected...* (Ola, 1984).

In his analysis, Otive asserts that the definitions above bring out four key characteristics of local government. First, local government officials are elected. Regular elections at specified period of time are a feature of local government. In fact, the main distinguishing characteristic that differentiates a local government from a local administration is the fact that while the officials of the former are elected those of the latter are appointees of the center to implement policies of the center. Second, the local government unit must have a legal personality distinct from the State and Federal Governments. Thirdly, the local government must have specified powers to perform a range of functions and finally, it must enjoy substantial autonomy. Local

government autonomy means that the local government is elected at the local level and operates independently of the State and Federal Government. The local government is no longer an appendage or field office of the State government. The characteristics of local government autonomy include among other things ability to make its own laws, rules and regulations; formulate, execute and evaluate its own plans and the right to recruit, promote, develop and discipline its own staff (Igbuzor, 2008).

Generally, Local Government refers collectively to administrative authorities over areas that are smaller than a state. The term is used to contrast with offices at nation-state level, which are referred to as the central Government, National Government, or (where appropriate) Federal Government. "Local Government" only acts within powers delegated to it by legislation or directives of the higher level of government and each country has some kind of local government which will differ from those of other countries. In primitive societies the lowest level of local government is the village headman or tribal chief. Federal states such as the United States have two levels of government above the local level: the governments of the fifty states and the federal national government whose relations are governed by the constitution of the United States (Wikipedia, 2009).

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

According to Gboyega, (1987) there exists two basic classes of theories of local government. He submits that the first class attempts to justify the existence or need for local government on the basis of its being essential to a democratic regime or for practical administrative purposes like responsiveness, accountability and control. While the second class of theories opined that an effective local government system contradicts the purpose of a democratic regime. This position is justified on the ground that local government institutions are neither democratic in their internal operations nor admit a responsiveness, accountability and control (Awotokun & Adeyemo, 1999).

The above position can also be amplified into different schools of thought with emphasizes on the functional responsibilities of local government. According to Ola (1984), these schools of thought include: (a) Democratic Participatory School, (b) The Efficient-Service School, and (c) The Developmental School. In their submission, both Awotokun and Adeyemo (1999) are of the opinion that the democratic school of thought holds that local government functions to bring about democracy and to afford opportunities for political participation to the citizen as well as to educate and socialize him politically. This view point has been corroborated by Keith-Lucas, David Bulfer and William Machezei. Nevertheless, the negative criticisms of participatory democracy is that it largely get along with exclusive advocacy for 'minimal democracy'.

David Plotke (1997), one of the critics calls for a conciliatory medium between participatory and representative models, others are skeptical of the overly leftist democratic ideology. Moreover, the self-interested, rational member has little incentive to participate because he lacks the skills and knowledge to be effective, making it cost effective to rely on officials' expertise. In addition, the aggregate citizenry is rather disinterested and leader-dependent, thereby making the mechanism for participatory democracy to be inherently incompatible with advanced societies. However, the efficiency school argued that what is central and important to local government is not the bringing about of democracy but rather, that local government must be judged - by its success in providing services up to a standard measured by a national inspectorate. Jim Sharpe further opined that the efficient performance of these services is so compelling that, if local government did not exist, something else would be created in its place.

The argument is that local needs are so important that they should override other functions of the local government and contend that the need or the function of encouraging democratic participation is not as crucial as the need for efficient-service delivery. The point of contention here is that for the proponents of the efficient service school to argue that all is well even if there is less democratic participation in the governance process as long as the local or grassroots people get efficient services from the local government is to erroneously posit that that certain number of politicians would not have the wherewithal to participate in state or national politics

since the local government offers the only opportunity for them despite the trainings in political education and mobilization of the citizens already acquired. This submission was buttressed by Sharpe (1970:163), as he argues that it is only by participating in and learning the arts of self government at the local level that the individual had a stake in and come to appreciate the virtues of free government at the national level.

The developmental school differs from the above two schools of thought over its ethnocentric bias in favour of the developed Western democracies. It argues that from Alex-de- Tocqueville and J.S. Mill to James Bryce and to the contemporary theorists such as James, Sharpe, William Mackenzie and Hugh Whalen there was the emphasis on Western Europe and Northern America. (Awotokun & Adeyemo: 1999)

Therefore, the developmental school really emphasized on how local government in the developing world can be an effective agent of a better life, an improved means of living, socially and economically, and a means to a better share in the national wealth. In sum, the above approaches can be categorized into two: the general and the developmental categories. The major functional items in the general category which sums up the ideas of the democratic participatory and the efficiency-school are democratic ideals, political participation, protective services and infrastructural services. Under the developmental category are national integration, social and economic development, and manpower resources development. Arising from this definition, the government itself states the primary objectives of the local government as follows:

- (a) To make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representatives body;
- (b) To facilitate the exercise of democratic self-government close to the local government levels of our society, and to encourage initiatives and leadership potential;
- (c) To mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development;
- (d) To provide a two way channel of communication between local communities and government (both state and federal) (Local Government Reform, 1976).

Arising from the guidelines, the primary aim of local government is even far beyond the conceptual views of the above scholars. More importantly is the fact that the 1976 local government reforms, the 1979, 1989, and 1999 Constitutions sought to make local government the bedrock of national politics as implied in the second objectives above.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

Political institutions are more than just symbols of a nation's political system. They are places where elected officials make the decisions that run the specific level of government in a given entity. They are places of learning. They teach us about how politics works in our jurisdiction now, and how it worked in the past. Without our institutions, politics in any country would not be as we know it today. Hicks and Swank, (1992) have posited that "political institutions are broadly construed to connote a very wide range of elements that extends beyond the formal organizations of the state to encompass political parties and interest associations ... that serve important interest group functions" (Hicks & Swank, 1992).

Nigeria is a democratic society. Its political system is based on freedom, equality and the participation by citizens in political associations and parties. The politics takes place in a framework of a federal presidential representative democratic republic, whereby the President of Nigeria is both head of state and head of government, in a multi-party system. Executive power is exercised by the government. Legislative power is vested in both the government and the two chambers of the legislature, the House of Representatives and the Senate. Together the two chambers make up the law-making body in Nigeria called the National Assembly. The highest judiciary arm of government in Nigeria is the Supreme Court of Nigeria. Nigeria also practices Baron de Montesquieu's theory of the separation of powers. The National Assembly serves as a watchdog to the excesses of the executive arm of government.

The local government is the third tier of the administrative structure in Nigeria. There are 774 local government areas (LGAs) in the country. Their functions are spelt out in the Constitution. In every political system, government is established to perform some customary functions. It is the extent to which the government succeeds in discharging

these duties that such a government could be said to be a successful one. These functions are spelt out in the constitution and other statutes. While some are political in nature, others are legal and managerial.

The Nigerian constitution confers legislative, executive and judicial powers to the various arms of government. In doing this, the constitution also made provision for delegation of this powers and the overlapping of some of them. (The Nigerian Constitution) The functions of government have been classified as legal, administrative and political. However, a good classification is found in the constitution itself in Chapter 2, which contains the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy. These provide for a set of aspirations and goals which the government seeks to achieve for the good of the citizens. The Chapter spells out political, economic, social, educational and foreign objectives amongst others. These objectives will form our headings for a better understanding of the functions of government in any given system (Agbakoba & Ogbonna, 2004).

Apart from providing for the above objectives, the constitution went a step further to mandate public officers and institutions to see to the attainment of the set goals by proclaiming that, *It shall be the duty and responsibility of all organs of government, and of all authorities and persons exercising legislative, executive or judicial powers to conform to, observe and apply the provisions of this Chapter of this Constitution* (The Nigerian Constitution, 1999).

The present Local Government system in Nigeria started with the 1976 Local Government reforms which aimed at restructuring the Local Government administration in conformity with modern society, and at best to make Nigeria's Local Government administration an ideal in Africa. A Local Government unit should have a population range of 150,000 to 800,000. The reform focuses on the administration of the public at the grassroots level where we have the majority of the population of Nigeria. Though the reform started in 1976, it passed through various stages of development in terms of scope of operation, functions and general administration. Some of the aims of the reform are: (a) The desire to extend the principle of Federalism to its logical conclusion, by bringing the government to the grassroots level, and (b) Uniformity of local Government administration in all the Local Government Councils of the Federation of Nigeria.

It could be observed that the second phase of the Local Government reforms is the election of the first Executive Chairman in all the Local Government Councils of Nigeria and the granting of autonomy to each of these Local Government Councils in 1988. Thus the Local Government, which used to be an appendage of the defunct Ministry of Local Government, has now become a true third tier of government in Nigeria. In this connection, one can emphatically state that Nigeria operates three tiers of Government; Federal, State and Local Governments. Each arm of the policy making body as well as the executive department, has specific functions to perform (Adamolekun, 1983).

THE 1999 CONSTITUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION

Three constitutions, those of 1979, 1989, and the 1999 are purely military in term of their conception. They could be termed none people's inspired constitution and that was one point which its detractors nursed against it. It can be safely said that the said constitutions contained the seed of their own destruction.

Be that as it may, in terms of its (1999 Constitution) relation to the Local Government Administration in Nigeria, one can say that the constitution preserve the tripartite system of government at the grassroots level. The executive, the legislature and the judiciary. The executive is vested in the chairman, vice-chairman, supervisor or supervisory councilors, and the whole machinery of local government bureaucracy. The legislative functions are meant to be performed by the councilors, who represent the wards which make up the Local Government Area. The judiciary on the other hand is streamlined with the federal and state and local government can avail itself of the judicial process available to it (Awotokun, 2005).

There is one important thing to note from the onset that is local government as a political institution has come to stay in the political landscape of Nigeria. This is because the 1999 constitution has recognized its existence. The constitution state *inter alia* The system of local government by democratically elected government councils

is under this constitution guaranteed, and accordingly, the government of every state shall, subject to the Section 8 of this constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions of such councils (The Nigerian Constitution, 1999).

The import of this federation is obligatory under the constitution. Apart from this, there must be periodic elections into the councils of these local governments as is the case with the federal and states' political institutions. This becomes imperative as local governments are seen as training grounds for higher level of political responsibilities in the federation (Awotokun, 2005).

The 1999 constitution for certain functions to be performed by every local government in the federation. This is contained in Two Sections (as listed) of the Fourth Schedule of the constitution as: 1. The main functions of a local government council, and 2. The functions of a local government council shall include participation of such council in the government of a state as respects the certain listed matters. As it is, two broad set of functions are assigned to local governments namely the first part concerns the ones which are exclusively within the preview of the local governments, while the second set has to do with those the local governments are expected to perform concurrently with the state governments as partners in progress (The Nigerian Constitution, 1999).

CONCLUSIONS

The history of local government in Nigeria shows that there are problems of governance issues. Over the years, efforts have been made to reform the local government system and increase the participation of the people. Despite these reforms, there are problems with the local government system. While there are problems with the running of local government (just like the other tiers of government) we posit that what we need are expansion of democratic space, entrenchment of democratic culture and the promotion of good governance, transparency and accountability. In order to consolidate the gains made in local governance over the years and re-position local government for greater performance, there is the need to reform local government along certain lines. First, local

government as a third tier of government should not be scrapped or changed to local administration. Rather, it should be strengthened and democratized. Officials of the local government should always be elected and not appointed. Second, there is the need to put mechanism in place to promote transparency and accountability at all level of governance.

In this regard, it will, be crucial to strengthen institutions of horizontal accountability and anti-corruption bodies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC). In addition, civil society organizations particularly at the local level should be reoriented and empowered to hold elected officials accountable. Moreover, there is a great need to reform the structure of government at all levels (Federal, State and local government). All these will require a comprehensive review of the 1999 Constitution. The Executive and legislature should display the political will and commitment to reform the 1999 Constitution that has been criticized by all strands of society. The reform of the constitution will address other issues that are germane to good governance such as party financing, campaign financing and proper electoral system to mention but a few. Finally, government should place premium on the participation of the people in all governance and development issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Local government administration can be improved upon through efficiency, popular participation in decision making and service delivery. But this will come about if the citizens know more about the issues involved in local government administration. Grassroots constituencies and individuals will be in a position to agitate for improvement and defend themselves against corruption and lack of accountability in governance if they are adequately informed. Therefore, the concern is to ensure that the local government in Nigeria is structured and administered in such ways as to further the political, socio-economic and cultural interests of its residents. It must be run to enhance the well-being and self-actualizations of the resident population.

If Local Government is allowed to survive, and with its remedies for the problems highlighted above, there are good prospects for the Nigerian Local Government system (Adetutu, 2009). These prospects include:

i) Convenient grassroots governance; ii) Quick execution of projects without the usual bottlenecks often encountered in getting approval from the defunct Local Government Ministry; iii) Provision of essential services to the public by the Local Government Councils; iv) Awareness of the community's responsiveness and participation. In short, the needless bureaucracy with regard to the release of funds for social services is avoided; v) By and large, both Federal and State Governments should shed their direct involvement and financial expenditure in favour of Local Government. Rather the two tiers of Government should only allocate funds for the use of Local Government and leave the latter to run its own programmes; (vi) There should be constant training courses and workshops for existing Local Government staff from time to time. To develop and implement good policies, an administrator must have the skill to develop and analyze social and economic data (Adamolekun, 2007). Although data collection and analysis is a serious problem in government agencies in Nigeria, it is more problematic at the local areas. One cannot over-emphasize the importance of reliable data. In particular, demographic data helps to identify the buying power and market size of a community and provides investors with information about the economic health of an area. There are inconsistencies and organized chaos in local government administration in Nigeria. The system has elected local government chairs and appointed administrators, and some states are creating 'development centers' in the local government areas. All these are conduits to channel public funds to cronies of state governors (Dibie, 2003). (vii) Since the local communities are the engines of national development, they should be managed by "transforming leadership"-leadership that builds on man's need for meaning, leadership that creates institutional purpose,' and, thus, leadership that can get things done (Schimtter & Karl, 1988). However, governments (state and federal) should assist local area administrators by giving them training (conducting seminars, conferences) in general administration (community development, social service delivery, human resource management, monitoring of resources, and so on. They should empower the citizens by creating employment for the rural dwellers and improve their living standard. More important, there should be continuing investment in, and maintenance, of social infrastructure, which is the foundation for economic growth and community development (Adamolekun, 2007).

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