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Daughters, Sons, and Spouses: The Emerging Political Dynasties in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of dynasties in the Nigerian political landscape since the return to democratic governance in 1999. The relatively stable atmosphere that had been achieved in the political scene which no longer felt threatened by the possibility of a military coup, as was the norm in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa and Latin America of the 1950s and 1960s, has made politicians relaxed and self-assured that civilian rule has come to stay. This feeling of assurance, among other factors, has led to the elite political class to want to perpetuate themselves in elective political offices, passing the baton to their sons, daughters, spouses, siblings and/or in-laws. Drawing from open-source materials available in newspapers and the internet, the paper found that it is now the vogue for elected public office holders to position close family as their successors in the offices they are vacating or others within the electoral system, including gubernatorial, federal and state legislative positions. It is our conclusion, in this paper, that notwithstanding that political dynasties are found in other democracies, they represent a real and potential threat to the Nigerian democratic space.

Keywords: *Political dynasties; elite succession; democratization; Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

After a checkered post-independence period, which saw the military in power in Nigeria for most of the years between 1960 and 1999, on 29 May 2023 another democratically elected president was sworn-in for Nigeria – the fifth elected president since the return to civil rule in 1999. It is safe to assume that democracy has come to stay in Nigeria given that, over the past 24 years, the military have remained confined to the barracks and civilians have maintained uninterrupted control of governance, with elections being the accepted and legitimate way of accessing executive and legislative positions as is constitutionally provided.

The military regimes that torpedoed elected governments in Nigeria beginning from the mid sixties have been blamed for the low level of human and infrastructural development in the country, in addition to denying citizens one of their core rights as citizens – the right to freely chose who should govern their affairs. Events locally and globally have contributed in Nigeria returning to democratically elected mode of governance, one of which is the near universal aversion to all governments that are not based on popular, periodic, and fair elections in which all qualified citizens could vote or be voted for. This is one major reason why Nigerians have enjoyed this period of uninterrupted spell of democracy.

While we may have seen the last of the military in the governance of Nigeria, this is not to say that democracy is safe and assured. In fact, the deceptively serene democratic atmosphere and institutions have spawned a culture and institution that are as inimical to democracy, if not more so, as the threat ever posed it by the military. Gradually, but surely, the political class is doing all it can to undermine the very foundation upon which it rests its claim for legitimacy on – free and fair elections - by muscling out others and positioning themselves and their families to rule in perpetuity. In other words, political dynasties are beginning to emerge and take shape in Nigeria with all the negative consequences and implications for the country's democracy.

Where the political elite covertly and overtly subvert the democratic culture to their advantage, the “feudalization” of the polity renders the mass of the public powerless, denying them the only instrument allowed them to sack nonperforming elected officials – their votes. With the emergence of political dynasties, however, voters are being left with little or no choice at all as the matter seems to have already been predetermined. Sons and daughters as well as other close kin are pushed to contest and occupy offices that parents are vacating due to constitutionally imposed time limits and where the parents are eyeing higher elective positions. Parents occupying political offices, drawing on the advantage of incumbency and access to state resources, leave no stone unturned in ensuring their children, wards and near kin emerge triumphant from the level of the party primaries up to the election proper. The father to son or daughter transfer of power is akin to the throwback era of feudalism where such was the norm.

In the rest of the paper, we reviewed the beginnings and foundational basis of political sociology, its theoretical underpinnings, literature on political dynasties as well as examine specific examples pointing to the emergence of political dynasties in Nigeria. We conclude the paper with suggestions on the way forward given the dire implications of political dynasties on a relatively backward country like Nigeria where nepotistic inclinations must not be allowed to develop nor thrive.

Political Sociology and its Theoretical Concerns

An examination of political dynasties must necessarily be preceded by a discussion of the field of political sociology and the theories that had shaped its development. From its inception, political sociology is interested in the study of power and the intersection of society and politics. While both political scientists and political sociologists do study elections, their interests and perspectives differ,

Who won and by how much, who voted for which candidate, or how did a political party mobilize its supporters was what interests the political scientist. By contrast, a political sociologist asks, How does voting compare to other means of gaining power, does an election outcome influence life chances for various social sectors, or can elections alter the distribution of power among the major classes/groups/sectors of a society? (Hicks, 1995)

The founders of political sociology, Karl Marx (1818-1883), Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), Max Weber (1864-1920), Robert Michels (1876-1936), and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), saw government as a site of power and an apparatus over which groups contest for control. Although the founding fathers differ on what each considered the central idea of political sociology, they were all focused on an effort directed at developing a critical understanding of fundamental power dynamics. According to Janowitz (1968:306), “political sociology has come to be linked to the analysis of the economic social, and psychological preconditions for political democracy.”

The theories in political sociology revolve around its three core areas - democratic participation and civic sphere for citizens, domination by elites in state and non-state bureaucracies, and owner power in capitalist social-economic formations. Michels (1999 [1911]), for instance, has warned that even under democratic dispensation the leadership would seek to entrench itself in power, subverting and or undermining the democratic principle of a level playing field, resulting in what he called “the iron law of oligarchy.” Gaetano Mosca (1966 [1896]) aligns with this position, arguing that, “every class displays the tendency to become hereditary, in fact if not in law,” p.74. According to Mosca, even when

political positions are open to all, as they are purported to be in a democracy, a family tie to those already in power would confer various advantages.

Political Dynasties: A Review of Literature

A review of the literature on political dynasties must begin with defining the concept. Political dynasties generally refer to traditional political families or the practices by these political families of monopolizing political power and public offices from generation to generation and treating the public elective office almost as their personal property (Dal Bo et al., 2009; Geys and Smith, 2017). Ali (2016, p.3) defines political dynasty as “a network of family politicians who come to power in an election based regime.” In other words, although feudal and monarchical forms have gradually been supplanted in many countries, even with elections, power seems to be concentrated in the hands of a few.

Political dynasties typify a form of elite self-perpetuation and persistence under a supposedly democratic set-up in which a single or few family groups monopolize political power. Traditional or monarchical system of government, where succession is established by tradition and is not based on election, is not considered in the definition of a political dynasty.

Political dynasties are found to exist by researchers in almost every country where democratic elections are the norm. Prewitt and Stone (1973, p.133) argue that “Democracy, except in certain radical formulations, does not deny an (hereditary) elite, but it urges that the qualifications for this elite be talent, accomplishment, and achievement, rather than birth and blood line.” However, what is worrisome, with respect to political families, is the real and anticipated consequences of political dynasties on the social, economic, and political development of any nation in which they hold sway. The existence of political dynasties in democratic societies, particularly in emerging democracies, nations that are beginning to shed off the yoke of totalitarian administrations, has sparked debate among pro-democratic activists, scholars and policymakers. Among several other concerns, political dynasties are charged with being a stumbling block to democratic consolidation (Querubin, 2010), an erosion of the quality of democracy as well as a source of corruption (Quimpo, 2007), and being a root cause of underdevelopment (Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno, & Brusco, 2013).

The literature has also interrogated the connection between wealth and political dynasties: Is the possession of wealth a factor in the formation of political dynasties or is being in politics a factor leading to wealth accumulation and establishing political dominance? (Stokes, et. al., 2013). Without doubt, politics demand the deployment of wealth in pursuit of electoral office, from party levies to canvassing support from voters, money is required. The elite are always in a position to draw on the wealth they had in and out of politics, leverage their social and political capital to maintain dominance, transfer power to their children and kin, and offer them opportunities that others may not get, including socializing them in the art and craft of politics. Kenawas (2015) argues that the determinants of success in building a political dynasty are the strength of the informal family network and the size of accumulated material wealth, which help dynastic politicians to tilt the playing field that can be created by using status of one of the family members as an incumbent.

The intergenerational hereditary transfer of political power between family members is a known feature of monarchical and other non-democratic regimes. Children and family members are foisted onto the political scene with some level of success with little or no resistance from the people (Brownlee, 2007). In new democracies, such as Nigeria, weak party structure leading to its dominance and manipulation by a few results in parties doing the bidding of a few. The existence of political dynasties in a democracy seem to contradict the normative visions of democracy – a system that is open, fair, transparent, and does not

depend on privilege of birth or ancestry. This was indeed what Michels (1951, p.1) was at pains to point out:

In theory, democracy makes all citizens equal before the law. It gives each one of them the possibility of ascending to the top of the social scale, and thus annulling before the law all privileges of birth, and desiring that in human society the struggle for preeminence should be decided solely in accordance with individual capacity.

Consequently, the normative expectation was that when societies democratize, the pool of contestants for offices is widened not constricted. National constitutions define those eligible to stand for offices and make provisions that are inclusive rather than exclusive. Democratic competition increase opportunities for capable outsiders, those who have no godfathers, to vie for elective positions, fully well assured that the electorate are indeed the final arbiters. We are not unmindful of studies of political elite which stressed that the ruling class has this tenacity with respect to their hold on power, this being because, it is more organized (Pareto, 1901; Michels, 1915; Mosca, 1939; Mills, 1956; Putnam, 1976) whether in or outside a democratic set-up.

The Dynasts of Nigerian Politics

In this paper, I examine the emergent Nigerian political dynasties, or what is called legacy politics. A legacy candidate is any candidate for national or state office who is related by blood or marriage (e.g. child, grandchild, sibling, spouse, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, or other close relative) to a politician formerly or currently also holding national office. This definition, contrary to what some Nigerian analysts may hold, exclude the likes of Mohammed Sani Abacha who had sought the office Kano State governor more than once, without success. Mohammed's father, General Sani Abacha, died in office as military head of state, and never held any elective office. Although the son of an elite, Mohammed does not fall within our definition of legacy politics.

While elites may share things in common, the defining feature of political elites is that politics is their major vocation. They found political parties, occupy party positions, and run for elective offices. In this way, they are able to carve a niche for themselves and distinguish themselves from other categories of elite. It is also true that inter-elite movement could and does happen, people who had made a name in business or military career may foray into politics, however, unless one has run for and won an office after which one of their relations wanted to step into his or her shoes, legacy politics does not come into effect nor does political dynasty.

In May of 2022, Nigerian political parties commenced the process of selecting the candidates to field for the general elections for 2023. Political analysts watched with keen as those that emerged from the parties' primaries included children, spouses and relations of people who had dominated the political scene since 1999, when democracy was ushered in after the exit of the military from power.

Writing under the banner, "2023 Elections: Children of Nigerian politicians that got tickets," in the Vanguard Newspaper of May 29, 2022, Miftaudeen Raji, gave a run-down of "quite a number of children of politicians that secured their party tickets to test their popularity and chances in 2023 elections." Raji (2022) provided details of the breakdown of votes won by the candidates in the primaries, including some of the drama, horse trading and related internal party politicking.

Coincidentally, on the same the day that Raji's report was carried in the Vanguard newspaper, Tunde Ajala, writing for the Punch newspaper, appeared with an analysis whose purpose was "to examine the rate at which children of top politicians and elite are dominating the political space, both for appointive and elective positions." Ajala (2022) noted the:

One striking trend that has emerged boldly in the ongoing electioneering is the number of politicians' children seeking elective offices. The number is simply unprecedented. Across the country, politicians seem to be paving the way for their children, perhaps to perpetuate their family's access to power or preserve the perks accruing to the family there from.

We begin our examination of Nigerian political dynasties from way back into the early political years of the First Republic when Malam Musa Yar'Adua was elected to the Nigerian Parliament and was appointed a Minister by the prime minister, Malam Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in charge of federal capital then in Lagos. At least three of Malam Musa's children have followed in his footsteps, including Umaru Musa Yar'Adua who, apart from being governor of Katsina State, died in office as elected president of Nigeria.

Malam Umaru Musa's siblings included the polished army general turned politician, Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, a key player in politics and one of those that gave their lives in the quest to see that the country returned to democratic rule. Although Shehu never held an elective position, he remained one of the most influential politicians in Nigeria up to the very end and was partly instrumental to getting his two brothers Umaru and Abdulaziz into politics. Abdulaziz, the youngest of the three, a former colonel in the army, has been elected to the Senate where he took his seat in June 2023.

Bukar Abba Ibrahim and his spouse Khadija Bukar Abba Ibrahim present us with a familiar strategy used by political families to entrench and perpetuate themselves in office. Bukar Abba was first elected governor of Yobe State in January 1992 and remained so until November 1993 when the military truncated the transitional process to full return to civil rule. In 1999, after another election was held, Bukar returned as governor and remained so over the following eight years.

It was while he was governor that Bukar appointed Khadija his wife as a commissioner in his cabinet. She remained in this position to the end of her husband's final term in office. However, both husband and wife had their eyes set on national political offices. Bukar contested for and won a seat to the Senate while his wife was elected to the House of Representatives. Khadija was voted to the House of Representatives three consecutive times – 2007, 2011, and 2015 from where she was appointed a minister by President Buhari. In the 2023 elections, Khadija and her step-son Mohammed brought the Bukar Abba Ibrahim family some media spotlight when they ran against each other in their party's primary for the House of Representatives ticket. Neither the step-mother nor the step-son agreed to step-down for the other, in the end, the more politically savvy Khadija thoroughly thrashed her step-son and clinched the party's ticket. She occupies a seat, at present, to return to the House of Representatives.

Erhiatake Ibori-Suenu, daughter of James Ibori, also seats at the House of Representatives. Her father, a former governor of the oil rich Delta State, was considered a political godfather on account of the huge oil wealth he had stashed when he was governor and which he was prepared to lavishly splash to get what he wants. Mr. Ibori first laid the ground for his daughter's election to the House of Representatives by making her cut her political teeth when he facilitated her election as member of the Delta State House of Assembly where she represented Ethiope West constituency. Having served in that capacity, she ran against the

incumbent representing Ethiope Federal Constituency, who is also a member of her party, the Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, during their party's primaries, where she was elected. At the general election, she trounced candidates of the other parties. It is quite instructive, as we shall see in some of the other examples we will be highlighting, that Erhiatake, on getting to the House of Representatives, was named chair of House Committee on Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), which is considered one of the "juicy" committees in the Green Chamber.

A colleague of Erhiatake in the House of Representative is Bello El-Rufa'i, also making his first appearance in the Green Chamber. Like Erhiatake, whose father was a two-term governor, Bello's father, Nasir El-Rufa'i was also a two-term governor of Kaduna State in the Northwest geo-political zone. At the time Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, Bello was merely nine years old, having been born in 1990. Other similarities with Erhiatake, include the fact that Bello was able to secure the ticket of the ruling APC in Kaduna, displaced a sitting member who belonged to the opposition PDP, to win the Kaduna North Federal Constituency. Bello was also readied for politics as he was a legislative aide to Sen. Uba Sani, who took over as governor from Nasir El-Rufa'i. At the House of Representatives, Bello el-Rufai was named Chairman, House Committee on Banking Regulations.

Olumide Osoba, an alumnus of the University of Lagos and London School of Economic and Political Science is son to journalist turned politician, Segun Osoba, who was a former governor of Ogun State. Olumide was re-elected as the member to represent Abeokuta North/Odeda/Obafemi-Owode federal constituency of Ogun State in the 10th Assembly. Olumide had represented the constituency in the House between 2011 and 2015 on the platform of the defunct Action Congress of Nigeria which had later fused in an alliance with other parties leading to the emergence of the currently ruling party, the APC. The elder Osoba is a leading figure in the APC. Olumide chaired the House Committee on Sports Development during the 9th Assembly; for the 10th Assembly he bagged the chairmanship of the prestigious Justice Committee.

Beni Butmak Lar, is daughter to the founding chairman of the Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, Chief Solomon Daushep Lar, a Second Republic governor of the old Plateau State. She has represented the Langtang North/South federal constituency since 2007, making her one of the ranking members of the House of Representatives. Beni Lar had held chairmanship of committees in the House of Representatives including House Committee on Women Affairs, Committee on Human Rights, and Committee on Science and Technology. Unfortunately, Lar's stay at 10th Assembly was cut short by a ruling of an elections tribunal which nullified the elections of all those who contested and won elections under the banner the PDP in Plateau State during the last nationwide elections. The tribunal voided the victories, saying that the PDP had failed to hold valid congresses to elect candidates to represent it. This political setback notwithstanding, it is safe to say that the last had not been heard of Hon. Beni Lar.

In Delta State a Marilyn Dumkelechukwu Okowa-Daramola, was elected into the Delta State House of Assembly to represent Ika North-East State Constituency. Marilyn father, Ifenyi Okowa is governor of Delta State at the time of her election. She was Senior Special Assistant (SSA) to the Governor of Delta State on Girl Child Empowerment, an office that her father offered her, where she headed the Girl Child Empowerment Office. Although lacking in legislative experience, Marilyn was named the Chair of the Finance and Appropriation Committee; as well as Deputy Chair, Housing, Women Affairs, Girl Child and Humanitarian Support Services committees, among others.

What is very clear from all of the above cited examples is the undeniable fact that political elites are exerting their utmost best in planting their daughters, sons and spouses in the political space thus disadvantaging the ordinary masses. Using state resources and instruments, the political elite have come to make nonsense of the democratic rights to choice and competition of candidates for executive and legislative offices. Brownlee (2007) says

Dynastic succession may be an alternative for departing autocratic leaders to protect themselves from possible threats, such as criminal prosecution, after they have left office (p.597).

As things stand, the masses are left hanging on the fringes and they may never find a footing in the centre of democratic politics so long as it continues to be done the way the elite do in Nigeria at the present.

Summary and conclusion

The argument in this paper is that since 1999 when Nigeria returned to democratic rule the seeds of political dynasties began to sprout and by 2007 and 2011 election cycles daughters, sons, and siblings of key political actors were being made to step into the shoes of their parents and spouses. In a situation where politics appears to be the most lucrative “industry”, those that contest and won offices ended up being stupendously rich due to their unbridled access to state resources. Not surprisingly, therefore, politicians are doing all that within their power to attain and retain political offices either by themselves or through family members for the purpose of exercising power and dominating state resources.

The undermining of the democratic ethos is inimical to development and represents a real and potential danger to the state and the citizenry. It is thus necessary to begin to interrogate the dangers that political dynasties portend so that action, including constitutional limits could be put in place to nip the trend before it gets out of hand.

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