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Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria and Politics of State Control: Unveiling the Enigma

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Abstract

Native Nigerians practiced different systems of local administration before British colonialism. The systems conformed to their needs, cultural orientation; operated as autonomous entity and were accountable to the native people. The confluence of these diverse modes of existence under colonial umbrella, culminated in colonial system of local administration, which was incompatible, fragmented and only intended to serve colonial economic agenda in Nigeria. The new system was neither independent nor freely exercised control over local affairs but colonial government determined its structure, operation, finance and personnel. Since post-colonial era, local government system has continued to expand in scope, responsibility, personnel, resource requirements, and capital outlay but its autonomy fluctuates. Debate on local government autonomy in Nigeria has given rise to schools of thought – protagonists and antagonists. Based on the persistent subordination of local government to State control amid failure of the system to perform its set goals, the departure of the colonial masters and assumption of leadership by Nigerians seem to worsen the problem. The paper interrogates the amphibious nature of local government autonomy, reasons for the politicization of local government autonomy, efforts towards resolving the dilemma of stakeholder and the logjam to the impasse. The research is analytical, based on secondary data and content analysis. The research adopted elite and pluralist theories in analyzing the politics of local government autonomy and found that the agitations for autonomy of local government in Nigeria cut across all classes but some selfish governing elites who want to perpetuate the exploitation of local government resources continue to stall the efforts. It requires constitutional amendment to prohibit the control of local government by the state government through a clearly defined framework for local government administrative and financial autonomy.

Keywords: Local Government, Autonomy, Politics, State Control, Enigma

Introduction

Local government in Nigeria is a product of decentralization and is established by law (Okafor, 2010). Since the advent of modern local government system in Nigeria, there has been an intermittent, if not constant alteration in its structure, the modalities for composition of its leadership, career personnel, financing and mode of operation. Local government as a third-tier government by law has administrative and financial autonomy but external political interests influence its autonomy.

The glowing concerns over local government becoming an appendage of regional and central governments (at alternating phases) presented a daunting challenge that initially gained some kinds of administrative and legal attention after independence. The result was several efforts and policy measures aimed at resolving the challenges through administrative reforms and constitutional provisions. The first attempts were the Local Government Reform of 1976

and the attendant provisions in the 1979 Constitution, Section 7(1). It guaranteed democratic form of local government system in Nigeria, and its functions listed in the Fourth Schedule, Subsection (2). The central objectives were to assert local government as a tier of government and strengthen the system of local administration in Nigeria.

However, most times, the legal and structural proposition for local government administration and optimal performance proves inconsistent with the roles of human and institutional factors in the impasse surrounding local government autonomy. In the first place, there is prevalent contestation between the national and state governments, over local government autonomy in Nigeria. The contestation has been a common occurrence in both military and civilian administrations without consensus on how to eradicate the scourge. The result is unabated politicization of local government autonomy amid deteriorating performance indicators that continue to hinder its smooth operation and desired impact on rural development. Kayode (2013) asserts that before 1976, when a unified local government system was adopted throughout the country, each of the regions, later state, operated the type of local government system that was unique to their political needs, but the advent of military regime with its centralized form of government affected this former arrangement. Military thus, preferred a system of local government administration that had national outlook in structure and operation and fitted into the unitary system, which blended with their centralized command structure.

With the reemergence of civilian regime in 1979, the regime readopted, the earlier arrangement prescribed in the 1976 reform, which recognized the local government as a third tier of government. The recurring abuse of the provisions concerning local government in the 1979, 1989 and 1999 Constitutions, especially by the state government, refreshed agitations for local government autonomy. As a result, scholars including Okoli (1980); Nwabueze (1982); Adeyemo (2010); Lamidi & Fagbohun (2013); Onuigbo (2015); and Ugwu (2017) have not wavered in their advocacy for direct financial allocation to local government, in order to protect its autonomy. This was on the heel that the 1988 reform made allocations of revenue to local government directly and no longer through the State. The reform also upgraded the statutory allocation of 10% from the federal government through the State to 20%, and it was considered a bold step towards strengthening local government autonomy. The upgrade reinforced the local authority in its financial administration by preparing and approving their income, expenditure and taxes, aside from state government.

Generally, the financial provisions in the 1988 reform made local government take full responsibility for primary healthcare, education and all related personnel, to facilitate rural developments. In addition, traditional rulers were involved in local government affairs. However, when civilian dictatorships replaced the coercive fester of the military, it tainted the system with widespread political maneuvers, which the target was to usurp local government executive powers and override its emerging financial autonomy at the expense of the population it supposed to serve their immediate needs. The subterranean scheming for power is common across national and sub-national levels of governance in Nigeria, but worse at the local government level. The obsession for inordinate ambition underlines the power intoxication that convolutes to tendencies of disrespecting boundaries in exercise of government powers once one assumed position of authority. Apart from being a common experience at the state level, where there is abuse of power by some governors, the other

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consequence is that it gives rise to a weakened political environment that does not guarantee solid local government system or the autonomy to exercise control over its affairs.

The subservient status of local government makes the bossy postures of the State over local government receives a boost. Meanwhile, there are divergent opinions about what the dependency status of local government on other tiers of government portends for its effective operation. The debate exposes the supposedly hindrances to local government autonomy in Nigeria and the implications for rural development activities by the council. The foregoing concerns anchor the glaring divides among the practitioners, administrators and scholars over what constitutes local government autonomy, the benefits associated with or derived from local government autonomy and the challenges inherent in the sustenance of a dependent local government system of administration in Nigeria. Either the polarity in perception has not helped to rationalize the challenges or it has not inspired consensus on how best to solve the problems. The above problem statement justifies the essence of this study; hence, the need to explore the politics of local government autonomy in Nigeria and the implications for effective operations of the system.

Conceptualizing Local Government

There is no consensus on the definition of the term local government. Each definition derives its substance from the nature of subdivision of administrative units in a country, the type of political institutions and authority system put in place, or of course, the nature of legal instrument, how it applies to units of authority and the layers of governance process in the State. Essentially, Izueke (2010) argues that 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 services and encourage cooperation and participation of the inhabitants towards the improvement of their conditions of living.

Buttressing the foregoing definition, Abada (2007) posits that local government is the tier of government closest to the people and it has constitutional powers to exercise control over the affairs of people in its area of jurisdiction. The powers exercised by local government gained first and foremost recognition from the Guidelines for Implementation of 1976 Local Government Reform (Erero, 1997). The ranges of power that the document conferred on the local government can be divided into four categories based on areas of emphases, such as power to:

- exercise substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff;
- exercise institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services;
- determine and implement projects to complement the activities of the State and Federal Governments in their areas; and
- ensure, through devolution of these functions to the councils and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institution that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized (Kayode, 2013:3).

In essence, local government provides the community with a formal organizational framework, which enables them to conduct their affairs effectively for the general good. What it portends, according to Abubakar (2010) is that local government is governmental administrative units' closest to the people, or in general parlance, the grassroots. The additional implication is that power devolves from the national and state governments to the localities in order to accommodate the interests of the local setting in governance and development. Alo (2012) alludes to the foregoing assertion and notes that, States or nations that aspire for development have to ensure decentralization of functions and power to lower levels to accommodate grassroots needs and interests. Ugwu (2017) extrapolates the notion of local government as catalysts for rural development in many societies especially the developing countries and thus defines local government from the perspective of its composite nature as,

a political subdivision of a polity (whether federal, unitary or con-federal), which is constituted by law (either by the Constitution, Decree or Edict) that has substantial control over local affairs, including the power to make and enforce laws, has the power to raise revenue and tax the populace or exert labour for prescribed purpose or the development of the area, (p.21).

In particular, the 1976 Local Government Reform refers to this idea and thus defines local government as government at local level exercised through representative council established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas (Agharese, 1984:23). Therefore, local government appears to be that part of the government of a nation or state, which deals mainly with such matters that concern the inhabitants of a particular district or place (Nworji, 2004). In addition, Adeyeye (2000) states that local government is a government by local bodies, freely elected, which while subject to the supremacy of the national (or state) government are endowed in some respect with power, discretion and responsibility, which they can exercise without control over their decision by the higher authority. It buttresses the status of local government based on its power relations with other tiers of government.

Thus, status involves the coordination of both human and material resources in each locality by representative body of local community, be it elected or appointed. In consonance, Chukwuemeka, Ugwuanyi, Okolo & Onuoha (2014:307) argue that local government generally is conceived as a form of public administration, which, in a majority of contexts, exists as the lowest tier of administration in a governmental system. Based on the above definitions of local government by scholars, it is possible to collate its distinguishing features, which summarize the fact, that the system:

- operates at the local or grassroots level;
- operates within a defined geographical area;
- has a relative autonomy or independence;
- has a range of constitutionally delineated functions to perform; and
- has its council composed of elected representatives.

The features listed above partly compare with the characteristics of local government identified by Ezeani (2004) which substantially represent a larger context from which scholars and practitioners perceive local government administration. The perception conforms to its roles in resource mobilization and rural transformation in developing economies. It underscores

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the reason for the persistent clarion calls for local government autonomy in every ramification, to enhance its efficiency in operation and in rural development activities. The frequently politicized call hinges on its uniqueness in several ways:

- localness;
- it has a legal existence enshrined in the constitution;
- it engages substantial autonomy;
- it exists within a defined territory;
- local government exercises its authority over a given population;
- it exercises specific powers and performs specific functions allowed by the constitution.
- the council is composed of elected representatives of the local people; and
- local government is bureaucratized into departments divisions and units.

The connecting thread in the preceding definitions is that local government is a political subdivision, established by law to serve rural purposes in areas of governance and development. These ideals are articulated in several documents and scholars share and hold the viewpoints in their study. The characteristics of local government listed above lend credence to the third tier status conferred on local government due to important roles it plays in governance process, in terms of bridging the gap between the federal and state governments in addressing local needs and in filling leadership vacuum.

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Since the inception of the system of local government in Nigeria, there has been persistent clamour for the autonomy of the local government as the third tier of governance in the federation (Eme & Izueke, 2013). Autonomy implies ability of an institution to be independent from external control, free from any encumbrance in decision-making, as well as funding and enforcement action. Therefore, local government autonomy connotes situation where the system of local government administration is not tied to a higher authority or subordinated to the dictates of any other tier of government (federal and states) but independent of their control in every ramification. The autonomy relates to self-determination of the structure, personnel, operation, discipline and funding of the activities of the local government. Ogunna (1996), in Okafor (2010) succinctly submits that local government autonomy means the freedom of the local government to recruit and manage its own staff, raise and manage its own finances, make bylaws and policies and discharge its functions as provided by law without interference from the higher government. However, this freedom has been impracticable across the stages of evolution, development and history of local government system of administration in Nigeria. Both in theory but especially in practice, it is easy to find some of the evidences in literature.

For example, the history of evolution and development of local government is replete with politics of autonomy with the attendant suppressed performance implications while the system is still mired in the controversy. Aghayere (1997), in Oviasuyi, Idada & Isiraojie (2010), posits that four points of historical reference could be identified in the development of local government administration in Nigeria, which includes (i) colonial rule; (ii) local government

reforms in the East (1951) and West (1952) respectively; (iii) the military coup of 1966; and (iv) the 1976 local government reform. The implication, therefore, is that only the pre-colonial system of native administration enjoyed relative autonomy before the advent of colonial local government system. Certainly, divergent politics has infected the autonomy of modern local government, whereby every successive governments subject it to irreconcilable draconian control.

According to Orewa (1986) and Ugwu (2017), the guidelines for implementation of 1976 local government reform provided that local government must enjoy substantial autonomy to perform array of functions, plan, formulate and execute their own policies, programmes and projects; rules and regulations as deemed appropriate for their local needs. This contrived autonomy includes power to control their finances, recruit and discipline their staff. Once local government exercises the powers, it translates to elements of autonomy in a way. Orewa (1991) and Owens, et al (1991) reiterate that local government, which is the level of government below the central government in the case of unitary state, or below the regional, provincial or state government, in the case of a federation, operates where it is obliged to provide a range of services and thus need authority to do the jobs.

What it means is that local government requires legal powers to enforce its executive and regulatory policies on its citizens without resorting to other tiers of government to achieve its set goals. It also means that local government has its own staff and revenue sources, in addition to the fact that legal instruments establishing it define its area of authority and the basis for representation on its political leadership platform. These roles typically align with the underlying philosophy behind local government creation to give rural areas the deserving attention in imparting leadership orientation, in developing positive behaviour towards public institutions, in participation in governance and development. Interestingly, the Guidelines for Local Government Reform (GLGR, 1976), and Model Financial Memoranda for Local Government, (MFMLG, 1991), indicate that local government is a robust channel for rural transformation but the system appears hollow for lack of autonomy.

The persistent lopsided structure and imbalance witnessed in the operations of local government warranted the initial politics for correction of the anomaly during the Murtala/Obasanjo era. It culminated in the 1976 reforms and thereafter, sustained agitations by the public and some reasonable government officials and institutions to bring local government at par with the State and federal government in terms of their legal status and autonomy. The earliest results of the quest for granting local government administrative, structural, financial, operational and political autonomy were that:

- Government established uniform structures of local government throughout the Federation. The minimum population for a Local Government Area was put at 150,000 persons and a maximum of 800,000 persons;
- Traditional authorities were separated from Local Governments and constituted into separate Traditional Councils with advisory functions over Local Council;
- The Ministry of Local Government was established in all States of the Federation to exert control and guidance on Local Government administration;

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- Administratively, the management and operational structure of the system was made single tier, with the Secretary as the Chief Executive;
- Functionally, Local Governments were made solely responsible for some developmental activities and services, while they performed others with the State Government;
- A statutory allocation of 10 percent was approved for Local Government Councils from the Federation Account, thus recognizing it as a third-tier government.

Explaining the rationale for reforms in the local government, the Local Government Guidelines (1976), Olasupo (2013) recognized the defects of previous local government system that deserve government further attention. For example, local government has over the years suffered from the continuous whittling down of its powers by other tiers of government. In particular, the state government has continued to encroach upon what would normally have been the exclusive preserve of local government. Lack of adequate funds and appropriate institutions have continued to make local government ineffective. A school of thought believes that the absence of autonomy is the bane of the system while the alternate school blames the problem on systemic factors with human inclination.

The Rationale for Local Government Autonomy

As a system of government that focuses on rural imperatives, local government performs ranges of functions, including developmental, administrative, legislative, and peace building through rural mobilization for participation in governance, integration into community based policymaking and implementation. The developmental components include “the provision of housing, social services, environmental services; refuse disposal and planning” (Joyce, 2006:265). Implied in the focal areas listed above is that several developmental functions are assigned to local government, which includes:

- provision and maintenance of primary, adult and vocational education;
- development of agriculture and natural resources, other than the exploitation of minerals;
- provision and maintenance of health services; and
- such other functions as may be conferred on a local government council by the House of Assembly of the State.

Administratively, local government coordinates the activities of its personnel, in policy formulation and implementation, monitoring, evaluation, reporting and promotion of programmes that target increase in productivity of the workforce. It involves matters relating to intergovernmental relations and intermittent expectations from stakeholders and all organs exercising authority in the local government. Furthermore, the Guidelines for the implementation of the Reform (1976), while describing local government functions within its areas of jurisdiction and derived from constitutional provisions, mentioned other administrative functions it can perform, among which include to:

- make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiative by developing or delegating such services to local representative bodies;

- facilitate and bring the exercise of democratic self-governance close to the local levels of our society and to encourage initiative and leadership potentials;
- mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development;
- provide a two way channel of communication between local government, state and Federal or national government;
- exercise powers that shall give the council substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional activities;
- exercise financial powers to imitate and direct the provisions of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal governments in their areas; and
- ensure the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

The legislative roles include law making especially bylaws, legislation on local government matters, especially administrative procedures establishing rules of engagements with corporate institutions and community-based organizations; processing of the local government appropriation bill, motions and legislative orders, including other supplementary roles that fall under the context. Adeyemo (2005),Olasupo (2013), Okibe (2016) and Ugwu (2017) identify other components of the legislative spheres that the council is empowered to exercise powers and list the following examples:

- law making, debating and passing local government legislation;
- debating, approving and possibly amending local government yearly budgets, subject to the chairman's vote, which could be over ridden by a two third majority of the councilors;
- vetting and monitoring the implementation of projects and programmes in the council's yearly budget;
- examining and debating monthly statement of income and expenditure rendered to it by the executive arm;
- impeaching the council chairman if committed impeachable offence based on the constitution;
- advising, consulting and liaising with the chairman who is the head of the executive arm; and
- performing such other functions as may be assigned by the House of Assembly of the State.

From the perspective of peace building roles, local government, in view of its locality status, identifies potential conflict situations, intervenes to resolve them; it mobilizes community efforts toward peace initiatives, coordinates the activities of community leaders including the Traditional Rulers, Town Unions and other community-based organizations. It

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also registers cooperative society and locally based development and welfare associations. The essence of exercising the power is to regulate their registration, operation and relation with the community members. In particular, the Fourth Schedule (1) of 1999 Constitution captures the comprehensive functions of local government, which crisscross the aforementioned developmental, administrative, legislative and peace building typologies. In generality, the functions connote autonomy in local government spheres of influence and include:

- 1) collection of rates, radio and television licenses;
- 2) establishment and maintenance of burial grounds and homes for the destitute or infirm;
- 3) licensing of bicycles, trucks (other than mechanically propelled trucks), canoes, wheelbarrows and carts;
- 4) establishing, maintenance and regulation of slaughter houses, slaughter slabs, markets, motor parks and public conveniences;
- 5) construction and maintenance of roads, street, street lightings, drains and other public facilities as may be prescribed from time to time by the House of Assembly of a state;
- 6) naming of roads and streets and numbering of houses;
- 7) provision and maintenance of public conveniences sewage and refuse disposal;
- 8) registration of all births, deaths and marriages;
- 9) assessment of privately owned house or tenements for the purpose of levying such rates as may be prescribed by the House of Assembly of a state; and
- 10) control and regulation of –
 - i. outdoor advertising and hoarding;
 - ii. movement and keeping of pets of all descriptions;
 - iii. shops and kiosks;
 - iv. restaurants, bakeries and other places for sale of food to the public
 - v. Laundries; and
 - vi. licensing, regulation and control of the sale of liquor.

The implication of these responsibilities is that autonomy of local government is very important and quintessential for effective performance and delivery of the needed services in the rural areas. The inability of local government to fulfill the mandate, divides opinions on the range of the causative factors that include - lack of administrative and financial autonomy, inept leadership, decaying value system, practice of nepotism, favouritism, corruption and issues of godfatherism, which serve as bane of Nigeria especially in imposition of leadership and other clandestine manipulations in the system.

Theoretical and Conceptual Issues

The politics of local government autonomy, deriving from its diverse nature, is better illustrated with pluralism theory, although in some respects, the explanation could draw some significant meaning from the perspective of elite theory of politics. Generally, elitism assumes that a community's affairs are best handled by a small subset of its members and in modern societies; such an arrangement is in fact inevitable (Maloy, 2020). Admittedly, elites play leadership roles in a society and decide what happens in the economy and the polity. It is for similar reason that the elite class is basically more pronounced in the agitation and surreptitious politics surrounding the quests for local government creation and consequently, strategically

position themselves to control the local government leadership for their pecuniary interests. They front this agenda and make significant impact based on the fact that:

- their power is concentrated;
- the elites are unified;
- the non-elites are diverse and powerless;
- elites' interests are unified due to common backgrounds; and
- positions and the defining characteristic of power is institutional position.

Although many interferences in local government administration and leadership are driven by elites, there are irrefutable evidences that show a contrary perspective on the issue of politics of local government autonomy in contemporary Nigeria which comes from diverse sources, comprising elites and the general public. The diversity of actors situates and rationalizes pluralism theory for the discourse. Pluralism theory depicts the system as functioning based on clusters of competing forces that emanate from combination of elites and non-elites alike. It proposes more than one system of power, a tradition that emphasizes how multiple major social groups and interests have influence upon and various forms of representation within more powerful sets of rulers, contributing to decently representative political outcomes that reflect the collective needs of a society (Dye, 2000; Deric, 2011). Hence, local government autonomy is not only politicized but a subject of interwoven politics.

Politics is the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community. Politics is also a form of rule whereby people act together through institutionalized procedures to resolve differences, to conciliate diverse interests and values and to make public policies in the pursuit of common purposes (Crick, 2004). Interest embedded in local government autonomy is sharply divided and the division reflects the differences in positions that are not static but switches with time. It is understandable that while the public and a section of the elite class are championing the advocacy for local government autonomy, a tiny fraction of the elite in positions of governance tends to politicize the clarion calls. It is for doing so that government in power with their cohorts readily rejects public opinion in favour of violence and suppression without reconciling the conflicting interests.

Reconciliation refers to the decision-making or policy-making, which is authoritative and binding on the community. Every organised community is made up of interest groups. Differences, which manifest themselves, are based, among competing and conflicting interests. When there is conflict of interest or disagreement, there is need for politics, which reconciles these interests. Politics takes place in organised groups. Without some form of social organisation, politics can hardly take place (Ujo, 1989). Politics does not only express the reality of disagreement and conflict in society but is also, 'one of the ways we know of how to address and potentially patch up the disagreements that characterise our societies without recourse to illegitimate coercion or violence' (Stoker, 2006).

The bane of local government has been the politicization of its autonomy. According to former President Olusegun Obasanjo, from what we know, by design, most states have incapacitated the local government. They have virtually stolen the local government money in

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what they called Joint Account. They were to contribute 10 percent but they never contributed anything (Oyeweso, 2018). This controversy has been in the front burner of national political debates and legislative meanderings.

Both reforms and constitutional antidotes have not bridged the non-adherence or compliance to local government autonomy legislative efforts and outright reforms. According to Okoli (1980), Nwosu (1989), Ogunna (1996), Ezeani (2014), Onuigbo (2015), Okibe (2016) and Ugwu (2017), the reforms and constitutional provisions made express statements regarding some key issues that would safeguard and promote the credibility status of the system, without promising results. These efforts are serially listed hereunder to show that it is not lack of law, which promotes local government autonomy but the bane is lack of political will amid institutional and organized corruption. These efforts include:

- **The recognition of the local government as the third tier of government:** This recognition is clearly articulated and expressly written or contained in 1976 reform report and the 1979 constitution, including other successive constitutions and technical committee reports;
- **Uniformity of Structure:** Local government was accorded a uniform structure, with clearly defined offices and powers, such as chairmen, elected councilors and nominated supervisory councilors, and a definite number of committees. The Finance and General Purposes Committee (F&GP) was the highest policy and decision-making organ in the local government council;
- **Fixed Size:** The low limit level of local government population is pegged at 150,000, with a caveat that the population could be less than 150,000 with special permission granted by the Federal Government. The upper limit level is 800,000 based on exceptional geographical conditions, relating to cluster of major towns with high population density. There is permission for no upper limits to the size of local governments covering major towns within single units;
- **Fixed Tenure:** The tenure of local government executive pegged at three years of two terms limit. It stabilized governance at the level and ensured that it was not subject to manipulation;
- **Establishment of Boards/Commissions:** There were approvals to established Local Government Service Boards or Local Government Service Commissions for monitoring and coordination of local government activities; and
- **Mandatory Deduction:** It set aside one percent (1%) of training fund for the training and retraining of local government staff to be administered by the local government service Commission.

Going by the 1976 reforms, the structure of the local government consists of two interdependent or complementary units – political and administrative, which intend to anchor its operations and autonomy. The Reform Report (FRN, 1976) indicates that the political unit encompasses the council and chairman, followed by the committee and supervisory councilors, while the administrative unit consists of the office of the Secretary to the Local Government

and the various departments. The Civil Service Reforms that came to limelight in 1988 provides for six departments, which the essence was to save the system from snowballing into any form of structural ambiguity and included:

- personnel management department;
- finance and supplies, planning, research and statistics department;
- education and community development department;
- agriculture and natural resources department;
- works, housing and survey department; and
- medical and primary healthcare department.

The reform exposed local government leadership to challenges of dependence on other tiers of government or lack of autonomy in their composition and operations. It degenerates to situations whereby the state governors, in most cases, determine who becomes the chairmen of local government councils either through stage-managed elections or caretaker committees. The governors arrogated to themselves powers to remove those elected or selected chairmen from office when they misbehave or disobey the GOCs (Uroko, 2020). This is usually linked to compromised elections, which the party in the leadership of a state merely conjures to impose leaders on the people and these leaders in turn become accountable to the governor and not to the rural populace in the area. In other words, the states often determine the tenure of elected members of local government councils (Ozohu-Suleiman & Paul, 2015).

The 1979 Constitution, in Section 148(5) provides for statutory allocations to the local governments from both the Federal Account and State Government's total revenue sources (Ugwu, 2017:20). In this direction, the manipulation and outright noncompliance or abuse of the provisions by the states through the establishment of State-Local Government Joint Account, waters-down the implementation of the financial autonomy clause. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo accused many state governments in Nigeria of stealing the local government funds through the joint accounts, thereby making grassroots developments difficult since they have been rendered incapacitated (Oyeweso, 2018). This is part of the many reasons that most of the State Governors are opposed to local government autonomy, which will scuttle their stealing spree in the local government system.

By appointing the local government leadership, the states either directly or indirectly control local government federal allocations and compel or persuade the appointees who serve as chairmen of the local governments through compromised elections, to acquiesce with the arrangement that compromises local government funds under the cloak of State-Local Government Joint Account. Former President Obasanjo argues that what we have across the country are local government areas that have functions, but cannot perform the functions. They have staff but most of them cannot pay the staff and we keep getting excuses upon excuses (Oyeweso, 2018). Corroborating the assertion, Uroko (2020) notes that the state-local government joint account is a fraud – a conduit pipe through which money flows from federal allocation into the state coffers and then distributed piecemeal to the local governments just to enable them to settle their wage bill and run the governments.

Politics of Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria – The Pros and Cons

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Scholars and practitioners are divided on the rationale for local government autonomy and the obvious implications for effective operations of the system under state control. Justifying the local government autonomy and the accompanying benefits, Doho, Ahmed & Umar (2018) believe that it has intrinsic and extrinsic benefits, which are highlighted to include that local government autonomy:

- Political Education: Local government autonomy will develop the system, and help in educating the people in the rural areas to acquire knowledge of the political system;
- Strengthens democratic decentralization of power and putting power in the hands of citizens at the grassroots level governance, in addition to delivering development;
- Delivers development evenly to each and every Nigerian since each person resides in a local council located in either the rural, semi-rural or the urban area;
- Enables capacity building of people in rural areas, which will be in form of economic empowerment through job creation and payment of salary and emoluments or freedom from external control of allocation, which the excess can be channeled into the economic system of the communities concern;
- Guarantees more money in the hands of local government to deliver services to citizens since it weakens the over-concentration of power in the state. Local contractors can now rely on the tier instead of the state and federal, and this may develop their capacity to handle more bigger and complex project in the future; and
- Provides a voice to minorities who will have representation at the local government level. Minorities no matter the size of their population will be part of the political equation and process of making the councilor or chairman of their local government.

Consequently, the Nigeria National Assembly in about two consecutive occasions passed the constitution amendment Bills seeking to grant local government autonomy, to enable it carryout the previously mentioned functions and even much more. However, politics over who controls the local government between the federal and state governments on one hand, and National Assembly and the State Houses of Assembly on the other, frustrated the efforts at the state level where it required two-third concurring affirmative vote of the 36 State Houses of Assembly to pass it into law. In one instance, former President Olusegun Obasanjo notes that only 9 states out of the 24 required by the constitution had signed it. They include Ogun State in the South West, Bayelsa and Cross River States in the South-South, Bauchi State in the North East, Sokoto State in the North West, Kwara, Niger, Plateau and Benue in the North Central (Oyeweso, 2018) and none from any State in the South East, indicating their aversion for local government autonomy. Ironically, the state government enjoys autonomy from the Federal Government but does not want local government to enjoy its own autonomy. That is the irony of the logic and slim path to addressing the lingered politics of autonomy.

In one occasion, former President Olusegun Obasanjo again described state governments that were still opposing the Local Government Autonomy Bill already passed by the National Assembly as enemies of the people at the grassroots. Hence, there would not be any meaningful grassroots development unless the Bill is assented to by the states, which have

over the years incapacitated the local governments (Oyeweso, 2018). There were follow-up calls on the leadership of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) to rise and demand for the council autonomy in the interest of the people at the grassroots. The essence of the call for mass action was to invoke the wrath of the public on the State Executives and State Houses of Assembly that persistently obstruct efforts at actualizing local government autonomy in Nigeria.

Nonetheless, the State has been in denial of any form of stealing from the local government funds, including undue control of the system leadership except as prescribed by or in accordance with the constitution and laws made by the State House of Assembly on the structure, tenure, personnel, finances and operation of local government in the State. This might be misleading based on practical experience of what the state does with local government leadership, finances and general operation. This experience is being blamed on failures or inability of local government to discharge its responsibilities creditably. In other words, it continues to receive hard knocks whenever local government is accused for not responding to demands for rural development and human empowerment.

Efforts to Eradicate Local Government Dependency and the Crumbling Bottlenecks

Consequent upon the 1976 reform, the Federal Government in 1977 allocated 5 percent of federally collected revenue to local government (Igbuzor, 2009). In addition, the elected and appointed officeholders, who were mainly politicians, had bureaucrats and professionals to guide and assist them in the areas of policy implementation. The provisions conformed to the Reports of the Dasuki Technical Committee on local government review in 1984 (Government White Paper, 1985). This was followed by the recommendations of the 1998 Civil Service Reforms in the Local Government System, the 1992 Handbook on Local Government Administration, and the 2003 Review of Local Government Councils in Nigeria (Olasupo & Fayomi, 2012:12), besides the provisions in the 1979, 1989 and 1999 Constitutions. Each of the constitutions reiterates the importance of local government autonomy.

Remarkably, the administration of Ibrahim Babangida abolished the Ministry of Local Government, established executive and legislative arms in local councils and made direct financial allocation to local government without passing through State government. It also increased local government statutory allocation from 15 percent to 20 percent with effect from 1992 (Igbuzor, 2009). However, in practice, local government continued to suffer neglect under the control of the State Government, thereby making the implementations of most of the recommendations difficult.

Obviously, there is consensus on theoretical premises (not practical) that local government is financially independent or sufficient when it receives direct revenue allocation from federation account, exercises jurisdictional powers on its taxing areas and incurs its expenditure without any form of external control. These operational criteria imply local government financial autonomy (Steytler, 2005; in Lamidi & Fagbohun, 2013). It also implies that the constituent units, which are closer to the people, must be allowed power, initiative and autonomy to achieve or work for the sustainable development of their territories by their own effort (Omaka, 2007:81). However, government does not appear sincere with the administrative and financial autonomy of local governments, especially at the State level where local government is reduced to government agency.

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Although subsequent military administrations later introduced many reforms that spanned the eras of Technical Committees, including several aforementioned constitutional provisions by its prompting, starting from the profound restructuring of local government system of administration in 1976, the legacy of military autocracy infected leadership in all rows of governance with unnecessary audacity and unfathomable sense of impunity. The general rot left governance in the hands of opportunists and rent seekers looking for fortune to exploit in government circle. Expectedly, it was worse at the local level where military administrators in the state and their successor civilian governors alike, unwholesomely converted and still convert local government to their economic empire or estates.

Some of the overreaching powers exercised by the State over local government relate to constitutional ambiguity, which the 1999 constitution, as amended has not resolved because of procedural hiccups. A salient example is in Section 7(1-6) of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria. Aside the impeccable declarations on the nature of local government to be formed and type of leadership to be constituted, it furthermore empowers State government to determine the affairs of local government. Conferring on the State the power to create local government, ensure the composition of its leadership and sources of its finances/funding could only translate to denying local government of autonomy. It makes local government become ordinary dependent third tier government and completely consigns it to a puppet status, as an institution that lives at the mercy of the State. The multiplier effects are that State government, either directly or indirectly and without regards for some constitutional provisions and other extant regulations that favour autonomy clause:

- determines the leadership of the local government, be it as substantive, caretaker or transition;
- constitutes electoral body for the purposes of conducting election to fill positions in the leadership of the local government, with all the negative consequences in the process;
- State government employs personnel of local government from grade level seven (7) and above, in addition to their promotion, transfer and discipline;
- State government through ministries, agencies and department created by it, decides projects and programmes to be carried out in the local government; and
- State government restricts local government councils from collecting certain constitutional mandated taxes or performing functions that are revenue yielding.

The meddling roles by the state deprive local government the conducive environment to operate freely without encumbrances and this is where politics of local government autonomy hinges its nod.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper examined the dynamics and complex web of politicking on local government autonomy, how the subjection of the system to state control derails the discharge of its roles in rural development and how the diverse calls and legal frameworks for granting the system autonomy is eroded. It remains a snag in the performance of local government leaderships that

are usually imposed by either appointment or flawed electoral process. The ugly trend results in a segment of the governing elite and general public condemning the dependency status of local government on other tiers of government much as it affects its resourcefulness in harnessing the manpower potentials of the localities to improve on their socio-economic wellbeing. Instructively, some of the problems embedded in the dependency of local government on the State are already highlighted and their implications for effective local government administration in Nigeria well discussed in the preceding sections.

The findings from the analyses show that the general rot in the local government system is a reflection of the handiwork of opportunists and rent seekers that ascend positions of authority at the state and national levels and thereafter focus on local government finances for selfish enrichments while in government. Additional evidence shows that state governors in particular, unwholesomely convert local government for their economic empire or estates through the instrumentality of State-Local Government Joint Account. The clandestine way the account operates denies local government the needed funds for numerous development projects beckoning for urgent attention in the rural areas.

In view of the foregoing, the following recommendations will help to address the challenges.

1. Federal Government through legislation by the National Assembly should sanction any State House of Assembly that connives with the executive to scuttle the passage of Local Government Autonomy Bill without reasonable justification for the action, by withholding its funds and suspending the members from participating in any national programmes,
2. Abolish State-Local Government Joint Account and disband the committee, to prevent the State and any other interested party from having access and undue influence over appropriation, allocation and distribution of local government finances,
3. Subject financial accounts of local government to regular auditing and inspection by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), so as to detect abuse of office by the leadership or corrupt practices either by the state or by the local government leadership,
4. Supervisory Councilor for Finance in the local government system, just as it is the case with Commissioners for Finance at the State, should be incorporated into federal allocation meeting and all local government monies paid directly into its accounts for use and accountability,
5. Abolish caretaker or transition committee leadership arrangement in the local government system and withhold for permanent forfeiture to federal government, federal allocation of funds to any local government that the leadership is not democratically constituted in any state,
6. Scrap State Independent Electoral Commission and reassign election for local government leadership to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), to neutralize state interference in the appointment of the electoral body and management of the electoral process,

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These steps will help in significant ways to eradicate incessant politics bedeviling local government autonomy and thereby restore sanity in the local government system of administration in Nigeria.

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