

## **THE DIALECTICS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ELITE CORRUPTION IN A POSTCOLONIAL STATE: A NIGERIAN CASE STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

We have principally examined in this study the dialectics of the political economy and the trouble with Nigeria. We have analyzed how the political economy has constituted a specific segment of the trouble with the Nigerian postcolonial state. The Nigerian narrative is depicted in the study as a saga of corrupt practices. The Nigerian state has further been characterized in the analysis as a vacuous entity for the feeding of the greed of the elite, as the result becomes a political economy of inefficiencies and disorder. Hence, the trouble with Nigeria in a way, hinges on the siege laid on the political economy by an unrepentant elite, which blatantly continues to articulate, implement and defend self-serving policies as public policies. The political economy challenge in Nigeria it was concluded is for the elite in generic categorization, to arrive at the realization, that the elephantine Nigerian state cannot possibly be propelled in the forward direction, while ignoring the co-citizenship-status of the masses of the state.

Keywords; Political economy, elite corruption, postcolonial state, Nigeria

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1983, Nigeria's late Professor Chinua Achebe made a seminal contribution to governance debates in the country with his highly esteemed work, entitled *The Trouble with Nigeria*. [1]. Then three decades after, the trouble with Nigeria has not subsided. It truly appears as if in the matrix of these problems, nothing may safely be said to have truly recorded a positive change. For instance, the trouble of corruption, which engaged Achebe's studious attention (in the work), has refused to retreat. Elite blindness [2], another issue that received conspicuous condemnation in the book, has also continued to bemire the Nigerian system. These negative indexes characterize the Nigerian reality, despite the abundance of both human and natural resources that benevolent Providence has bestowed on the country. Nigeria is therefore aptly described as a paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty [11]. Existing alongside this high rate of poverty in Nigeria is a high rate of corruption. Hence, mega corruption has grown to a level of impunity in the last two decades, with the country being variously rated as the most corrupt in the world [11].

This endemic corruption is further linked to the huge incidence of poverty in the country and is related to the massive stealing of public resources that would have been invested in providing wealth-creating infrastructure and social services for the citizenry [11]. In this study therefore, we look at a political economy angle to the unabated trouble with Nigeria. The general objective of the study is to examine the dialectics of the political economy and the trouble with Nigeria. The specific objectives are to (a) examine how the political economy has constituted a specific segment of the trouble with Nigeria and (b) make recommendations on the way forward for the country. Invariably, the study's theoretical background reflects both the political economy paradigm and the elite theoretical framework. The methodology of the study is logical argumentation.

### **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION(S)**

#### **Political economy**

What is the meaning of political economy? It has been described as the branch of social science that studies the relationships between individuals and society and between markets and the state, using a diverse set of tools and methods drawn largely from economics, political science, and sociology [3]. The term *political economy* is consequently derived from the Greek *polis*, meaning "city" or "state," and *oikonomos*, meaning "one who manages a household or estate." Political economy thus can be understood as the study of how a country - the public's household - is managed or governed, taking into account both political and economic factors [3]. It is a very old subject of intellectual inquiry but a relatively young academic discipline. Furthermore, the analysis of political economy (in terms of the nature of state and market relations) both in practical terms and as moral philosophy has been traced to Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle as well as to the Scholastics and those who propounded a philosophy based on natural law [3]. Balaam [3] further highlights that a critical development in the intellectual inquiry of political economy was the prominence in the 16th to the 18th century of the mercantilist school, which called for a strong role for the state in economic regulation. Thus, many analyses by political economists had revealed that in actual government decision-making there was often a tension between the economic and political objectives [3] of the state.

Invariably, this study is about the relationships between individuals and society and between markets and the state. It is about how there is often a tension between the economic and political objectives in actual government decision-making in the Nigerian state. In the study therefore, we see political economy as the structural-functional relationship between the economic and political objectives of government or the state. It is about political and economic inputs in government and their results or outputs for the benefit of every citizen. In one sense, the meaning of political economy is straightforward; it refers to the intersection of the political and the economic [4]. In a way therefore, the trouble with the Nigerian state [1] principally borders on the ambiguity and the ambivalences of the intersection between the political and the economic, as dictated by the elite.

#### **Elite theory**

According to Mbah [5] the elite theory was propounded as a counter to the revolutionary theories anchored on social class analysis. Vilfredo Pareto presented the theory systematically in his work, *The Mind and Society*. And Gaetano Mosca in his work, *The Ruling Class* also highlighted the concept of elite, which subsequently became a key concept of new social science [5]. Robert Michels also is usually enlisted among the classical elite theorists. The term, *elite* in its most general sense however refers to those positions in society which are the summits of key social structures, i.e. the higher positions in government, economy, politics, religion, etc [5,7]. The elite

owe its peculiar position of privilege to the recognition and esteem accorded to it by the people in society [5]. Elite theory thus seeks to describe and explain the power relationships in modern societies [6]. The theory posits that society is stratified into two, the masses at the bottom and the ruling elite at the top. The elite are the rich, well-educated and politically influential groups, who share common beliefs and use their influence to dictate public policies [6]. In postcolonial states, the role of the elite is characteristically in the questionable regard.

### **Postcolonial state**

The postcolonial state is subject to a number of interpretations [8]. It is sometimes, referred to as the “transplanted state”, in reference to some institutions imported from the West; or the “hybrid state”, following the re-appropriation of the Western norm and its adaptation to Africa; or the “neo-patrimonial state”, referring to a political structure built around sumptuary (sic) consumption and absolute disregard for productive investment [8]. In the case of Africa, rather than the state, we must look at the simple bureaucratic structure of exploitation, incapable of ensuring law and order, defense, contracts or infrastructure [8]. The idea of the state as being vacuous and inefficient has also been mooted. Vacuous because it was not consolidated after independence and was held hostage to factional disputes; inefficient because the elites established an inverse relationship between its institutionalization and usefulness [8]. An interpretative paradigm called the “political instrumentalization of disorder” has been suggested, referring to how political actors acquire benefits by creating a climate of confusion, uncertainty and chaos that reigns in African societies. This instrumentalization prevents a more thorough examination of the state's institutionalization, and the institutional fragility encourages the political instrumentalization of corruption [8]. In other words, a postcolonial state can easily refer to a state with postcolonial multiple disorders. Consequently, embedded in the postcolonial state characterization is the notion of negativities. Fundamental to the germane issues is the trouble of corruption. Furthermore, there is the issue of the monumentally questionable acts of the elite. The combination of all of this makes the postcolonial state an unbecoming entity.

### **THE TROUBLE OF CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: THE ELITE TRAJECTORY**

The Nigerian narrative is monumentally also a saga of corrupt practices. The unearthing of egregious cases of corruption have accordingly ceased to be odious in Nigeria. Such corrupt practices are currently recorded in trillions of naira (and trillions of dollars). Attempting a comprehensive cataloguing of publicly recorded cases of corruption in Nigeria (even on daily basis) is problematic, as such incidents are innumerable. Olufemi et al [9] and Oluwole [10] contain records of some highly publicized corruption occurrences in the period, 2010-2015 (under the Jonathan Presidency). Indeed, in very simple and clear terms, the monumental enumerations indict the Nigerian elite in its generic connotations. It typifies the scenario of elites establishing an inverse relationship between the institutionalization of a state and its usefulness [8]. Under the Nigerian setting, the elite that were suspects in such corruption cases would never be thoroughly investigated and are hardly ever convicted of any offences. Whenever some feeble convictions would be orchestrated, the accused elites are under the orthodoxy subsequently released in plea-bargains.

Some of the elites that are adjudged by government to have been convicted in error, are even granted state pardon. According to ActionAidNigeria therefore [11], the politicization of corruption by the government, in which people who have been indicted and or convicted of corruption, are given state pardon for reasons of political expediency, as well as their rehabilitation by the government, weakens the fight against corruption. Furthermore, the

shielding of public officials (the political elite) from facing investigation against corruption has also not helped matters and there is a lack of political will at the highest levels of government to reduce corruption [11]. We specifically identify the government functionaries as the political elite in a postcolonial state. The state is hence, created for the corrupt elite in this type of postcolonial setting. The state essentially remains a vacuous entity for the feeding of the greed of the elite and the result is a political economy of inefficiencies and disorder.

#### **THE TROUBLE WITH NIGERIA AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY CHALLENGE**

In this section of the study, we begin by posing the following questions: what is the nature of the relationship between individuals and society and between markets and the state in Nigeria? In whose favour is the tension that usually arises between the economic and political objectives in actual government decision-making in the Nigerian state always resolved? What are the factors that drive the structural-functional relationship between the economic and political objectives of government in Nigeria? In each of these questions, we opine that corruption and elite greed are the central issues. Consequently, Nigeria has in recent times, been referred to as the fastest growing economy on the African continent and one of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world. Ironically, the country also harbours some of the poorest people in the world, with as many as 69 percent of the population, which is about 112.47 million Nigerians, living below the poverty line [11]. This is because; the relationship between individuals and society and between markets and the state in Nigeria is critically skewed, in favour of the corrupt elite. Hence, given the country's enormous resources, it is puzzling that such a huge portion of the populace lives in poverty [11], an absolute indictment on the political economy. The vast incidence of poverty in the midst of plenty has consequently, severally been linked to the endemic corruption in the country, as it involves the massive stealing of resources that would have otherwise been invested in providing wealth-creating infrastructure for the citizens [11]. In the Nigerian political economy therefore, the elite have continued to attempt to play the role of dominion in the relationship between markets and the state.

Besides the abundance of proofs from lay literature in Nigeria, it is also evident from scholarly research findings that state governors, ministers, legislators, ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) at national, state and local government levels, have unrepentantly mismanaged public funds. These are the individuals and institutions, which control the machinery of government and are responsible for the deployment of resources for welfare and development [11]. In other words, these are the leading individual and institutional actors in the Nigerian political economy. Furthermore, the private sector, which has carried out capital projects on contract basis at national, state and local government levels, has also been involved in corruption, either in the form of kickbacks, non-performance or under-declaration of internal operations, including profits [11]. In this regard, the political economy-angle to the trouble with Nigeria becomes further accentuated. Therefore, when the elite refer to lack of patriotism (by the masses), indiscipline of the citizens (the masses), labour (masses) un-productivity, and even terrorism as the critical issues of the political economy, the truth is that they are not. The trouble with Nigeria in a way, hinges on the siege laid on the political economy by a garrulous and unrepentant elite that blatantly continues to articulate, implement and defend self-serving policies as public policies.

#### **THE WAY FORWARD**

We opine at this point that the way forward is incidentally quite straightforward. In this regard, a certain Nigerian institution named, the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS) needs to be elevated from its current contentious status as an important institution, to

the rank of an action-oriented (elite) body for the reversing of the postcolonial conundrum in Nigeria. Nigeria's NIPSS was actually established by Decree No. 20 of 1 January 1979 (now NIPSS Act CAP 262 of 1990) to conduct policy research for government and train senior executives in policymaking and implementation skills [12]. The National Institute ostensibly serves as a high-level centre for reflection, research and dialogue. Here, academics of excellence, seasoned policy initiators and executors and other citizens of mature experience and wisdom, drawn from all occupations, are meant to meet, to reflect and exchange ideas on the great and critical issues of society, particularly as they relate to Nigeria and Africa, within the context of a constantly changing world. The Institute aims to be a model institution for inculcating the highest national ideals and achieving the best results from a rational deployment and utilization of resources [13]. To achieve these objectives, the Institute, among other things:

- Conducts courses for top level policy makers and executors drawn from different sectors of the country, with a view to widening their outlook and perspectives on issues and improving their conceptual capacity, quality of analysis and decision making;
- Conducts research into the social, cultural, economic, political, scientific, technological, security and other problems that face Nigeria with a view to contributing to the search for their solutions;
- Conducts seminars, workshops and other action-orientated programmes for leaders and potential leaders in the public service, the private sector, political organizations, professional bodies and other groups with a view to enhancing their appreciation of long-range national plans and objectives, and applying themselves to solving these problems;
- Organizes brainstorming sessions for the purpose of discussing urgent national issues and recommending policy measures for their solution;
- Disseminates information through published works, monographs and reports on any part of its activities [13].

We opine that the evident functionality of this institution (an otherwise elite establishment) is enough to permanently delist the Nigerian state from the disreputable class of postcolonial entities. The NIPSS has since 1979 (when it was established) graduated 1781 course participants [14]. This fundamentally implies the availability of 1781 road-maps on the way forward for the political economy in Nigeria. It is however also indicative of a truth that the trouble with Nigeria is the apparent refusal of the elite, to soft-pedal on its dominion over the country's political economy. It is not the masses that would implement these supposed blueprints as abundant in NIPSS. Is it not the elite? The same elites have continued to re-create elite institutions such as NIPSS, which reproduce vacuous road-maps that contradict each other. The political economy challenge in Nigeria is for us as elites to arrive at this realization, that the elephantine Nigerian state cannot possibly be propelled in the forward direction while we ignore the co-citizenship status of the masses - that in the intersection of the political and the economic in any state, it is not plausible to disregard the masses of the state.

## **CONCLUSION**

Indeed, the political economy of the postcolonial Nigerian state is currently troubled. The Nigerian elite is the problem. Elite corruption is the central issue. Elite insensitivity is among the germane matters. The political economy has thus constituted a specific segment of the trouble with Nigeria, principally because of elitism. We have argued in this study that the Nigerian state exhibits in obviously covert regards, the characteristics of postcoloniality. We have attempted to demonstrate that the elite class is the singular driver of this perennial state of affairs. We have

also argued that incidentally, the Nigerian elite must take up the responsibility of reversing this trend of unfitting developments. It has been opined in the paper that elitist exclusivity (in the face of abject poverty of the majority) cannot propel the Nigerian political economy to the heights of sustainability. The postcoloniality, which the Nigerian state typifies thus, signifies an unbecoming reality.

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