

**CARETAKER COMMITTEES AND DEMOCRATIC
AUTONOMY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN IMO STATE,
NIGERIA (1999-2022)**

George I. Okoroafor^{1*}, Chiaka Umoh² & Hope Chibututu Nwabuzor

¹Public Administration Department, Imo State Polytechnic, Omuma (Formerly Umuagwo)

²Public Administration Department, Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, Imo State, Nigeria

³Political Science Department, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria

*georgeokoroafor@g-mail.com

ABSTRACT: The use of appointed caretaker committees in the running of local governments contradicts the democratic autonomy of the local government provided by the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended. This has elicited a number of questions calling for clarifications. With the purpose of questioning the interest behind the use of caretaker committees and their effects on the democratic autonomy of the local governments in Imo State, Nigeria, the study relied on descriptive methodological design and benefited from documentary materials, personal observation and interviews. It utilized elite and Marxist theories as the findings revealed that the use of caretaker committees in the running of local government is anchored on political elite interest, the fear of opposition by the ruling political actors and lack of specific tenure of office by the elected local government council. The paper recommended among others the amendment of the 1999 constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, particularly Section 8 which gives unrestricted control of local governments to the state government. It also called for specific term of office of the elected council and institutionalization of democratic governance in the local governments.

Keywords: Caretaker Committees, Local Government, Democratic Autonomy, Political Elite.

INTRODUCTION

The continued failure of local government's democratic autonomy in Nigeria is largely attributed to the incessant use of caretaker committee appointed by the political elites in the state to run the local government councils. This whittles down the right of the local inhabitants to participate in the political process especially in electing their representatives in the local government (Ogunna, 1996). It also contradicts the 1976 Guidelines for Local Government Reforms and the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended, which provided for the exercise of democratic self government and leadership in the local government administration (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 1976; Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 1999; Eme, Iheanacho & Okoroafor, 2016). It is instructive to state that the Section 7 (1) of the constitution provides for the running of local government with elected councils, subject to Section 8 of the constitution, which empowers the state government to legislate for the existence, establishment, composition, structure, finance and functions of the local government council. This immediately implies that Section 8 of the constitution places local government councils under the blanket control of the state

governments. As a result, the state political elite take undue advantage of this provision to manipulate the local governments through the use of non-elected officials appointed to serve as caretaker committees in order to advance their political fortune, build political structures and overcome political opponents. This in itself constitutes a breach of democratic autonomy of the local governments as the grassroots inhabitants lose their right of electing their representatives to the council and in determining their destiny in the political process (Eme, Idike & Onuigbo, 2017; Offiah & Okoroafor, 2021). Based on this, local government administration has been described as troubled, disarticulated and dysfunctional (Bolaji, 2018) in terms of democratic practice.

It has been argued by scholars such as Ola (1984), Ogunna (1996), Okafor (2013) that the sustenance of democratic local government councils provides political consultation and participation. Hence, the use of non elected caretaker committee undermines massive grassroots political participation which is largely responsible for democratic disconnection and alienation of the people from the local government (Anyanwu, 2011). Accordingly, local government democracy cannot become dynamic and sustainable if the system is not people oriented and inspired (Adedeji, 1999, cited in Enyi, 2013).

Against the foregoing, this paper questions the interest behind the use of caretaker committees and its effects on the democratic autonomy of the local governments in Nigeria, with emphasis on Imo State.

Theoretical Framework

This discourse benefits from two theoretical postulations: The elite theory and Marxist theory of the state.

Elite theory has been traceable to the works of Vifredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, John Walker, David Truman, Robert Dahl, Wright Mills, etc (Eme, Anyadike, Ugwu & Idike, 2015; Egwu, 2017; Obasekore, 2018; Tafida, 2017). According to them, at the heart of elitist theory is the presumption that political system exists on the wisdom, skills, preferences and choice of a few political leaders, and not on the population at large (Walker, 1966). In this case therefore, the political system is divided into two groups: first, the elite or the political entrepreneur, who possess ideological commitments and manipulative skills. It consists of a small organized minority who control the apathetic, indolent and slavish people who are susceptible to flattering and obsequious in the presence of strength (Walker, 1966; Michels, 2001). They hold the leading positions in the strategic hierarchies as the governing class. The second group is the citizens at large. They are the masses, a much larger class of passive, inert followers who have little knowledge of public affairs, and even less interest (Dahl, 1966). They constitute the governed who are in the majority.

The application of elite theory in this study lies on the notion that in a political and democratic system, power and authority is always located in the ruling elite who share consensus on basic goals and values. Public policies at the national level at large and local governance in particular reflect their preferences and interests. Hence, policies in government are articulated, formulated and implemented along the elite choice. They own political structures and determine democratic and political development (Dunleavy & O'Leary, 1987, Tafida, 2018; Eme, Anyadike, Ugwu & Idike, 2015).

Against the foregoing, the use of appointed caretaker committees in the running of local governments in Nigeria, particularly in Imo State is, a ploy designed by the elite to dominate, control and consolidate their social, political and economic positions. This is in tandem with Plato's thesis on classification of society where governance responsibility is only exclusive or at least the primary possession of a privileged few (Hacker, 1957). It cannot go without positing in the light of elite theory, that the use of caretaker committees in the running of local governments in Imo State is anti liberal democracy; it undermines political equality and representation and prevents the control of government decisions by the greater number expressing their preferences in the "last say" (Dahl, 1966). It only allows the greater number of citizens a passive role in the political process and only guarantees limited representation (Dahl & Lindbloom, 1953). Hence, it does not maximize the democratic autonomy of the local government as provided for in 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended.

The next theoretical postulation is Marxist theory of the state. The theory holds that the state is an instrument of the dominant class for exploiting and suppressing the subordinate class (Marx & Engels, 1971). Hence the creation of the state is predominantly the instrument of the bourgeoisie designed to serve legitimacy for their actions and enforce compliance from the proletariat as well as to sustain the imperialist tendencies of the bourgeoisie (Ezeani, 2004). In this wise, the state structures are instruments of repression and oppression, exploitation and accumulation of power and wealth to the ultimate goal of the capitalist (Onyishi, 2011).

Marxist theory explains why the dominant class use caretaker committee system in the management of local governments in Nigeria in general and Imo State in particular. Put differently, caretaker committee is orchestrated by the political capitalist to sustain their political and economic interest in the system. It is mostly to the advantage of a few political elites (such as the governors, party loyalists and faithful, the State House of Assembly member etc) (Udoh, Isaac & Onuh, 2015; Onah, 2018). The use of caretaker committee to run the local governments is anti-proletariat as it seriously whittles down the democratic autonomy of the local people in electing their representatives and in the decision making and implementation process.

Marxist theory of the state was developed and employed by scholars such as Ake (1995) and Ibeanu (1998) among others. They contend that the post colonial states were structured to protect the interest of the local and foreign imperialists which is the root of conflict in these states. The Marxist theory of the state has been criticized for being abstract and unrealistic in methodology and practice. Nevertheless, it has, however, remained of great value in political discourse especially at the local government level in Nigeria in general and Imo State in particular.

Local Government

The definition of local government has remained endless among scholars. But one definition that is significant to our study is one offered by Ogunna (1996, p. 1) for him, local government is "a political authority which is purposely created by the law or constitution of a state for the local communities by which they manage their local public affairs within the law/constitution". Similarly, the 1976 Guidelines for Local Government Reform states that, local government is government at the local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise powers within defined areas. These powers should give the

council substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal government in their areas, and to ensure, through the devolution of functions of these councils, and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiatives and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

The foregoing definitions suggest that local government is a political authority created by the constitution at the grassroots level which is exercised through representative council. It operates within the limit of the law or constitution that created it. However, the most important purpose of creating local government according to the 1976 Guidelines for the Local Government Reform and Ikelegbe (1980, cited in Onah & Amujiri, 2011, p. 29) is facilitation of democratic self government at the local level through local representatives. Others are mobilization and management of local resources through local involvement and encouragement, the planning and provision of services and development activities based on local needs, enhancement, stabilization and decentralization of government activities and services to the people, and the integration of local communities into the federal scheme.

Conceptual Framework

- **Caretaker Committee System:** Caretaker committee system is a temporary administration appointed by the political elite in the local government which is designed to achieve a specific objective. Ihekwoaba (2013) writes that caretaker committee involves the appointment of people by the political elite in the state to run the affairs of the local government on their behalf rather than in the interest of the masses.

Moreso, caretaker committee system simply involves the use of non-elected committee appointed by the political elite in the state in their own interest. Ogunna (2003) demonstrates that there are six factor syndrome associated with caretaker committee system. First, it is always featured where there is breakdown of law and order. In other words, it is an emergency administration which emanates where there is vacuum of political power and leadership. Three, it is of short duration. This suggests that caretaker committee system is temporary in nature. Four, it is not change oriented. In other words, it is a conservative administration. Five, it is unrepresentative of the masses. Therefore, it is not based on mandate theory as it is not accountable and responsible to the masses. Lastly, caretaker committee system may perform both legislative and executive functions in the local government.

- **Democratic Autonomy:** The concept of democratic autonomy has remained so controversial that scholars use it to mean different things. In a simple parlance, it means local self government and democracy (Eze & Muanya, 2013). It is the constitutional power of the local government to function as a political authority which gives the majority of the people at the grassroots level the fullest opportunity to participate in determining their own affairs and managing their collective interest (Idike, 1995 cited in Eze & Muanya, 2013). In this case, democratic autonomy suggests popular consultation, participation and common interest. For Ogunna (1996), democratic autonomy connotes the power of the local government (local people) to elect their officials who decide and direct the activities of the local governments, and

who make policies, and bye-laws as well as provide social services. From the above definition, democratic autonomy in the local government is the administration of the local government councils by the people's representatives without undue control and interference of the higher tiers of government (state and federal governments).

Empirical Review

Many scholars have commented and written on caretaker committee as it affects local government democratic autonomy.

For instance, Ojo and Ihemeje (2014) were concerned with mushrooming appointed caretaker democracy as a quagmire to grassroots democracy in Nigeria. They argued that the use of appointed caretaker committee has impoverished the political institutional structure of local government. The study was qualitative in nature and benefited from secondary sources of data. The findings of the study established that out of 36 States, 14 were operating appointed caretaker committee local government council in Nigeria thereby denying the people of fair representation and participation. The study, among others, called for constitutional review to close the gap entrenched in the 1999 constitution for strong and stable democratic political institution of the local government.

Eze and Muanya (2013) looked between democratic and the caretaker committee approach to local government administration in Nigeria, with emphasis on Anambra State experience, between 2006 and 2013. The paper posited that Anambra State has for nearly seven (7) years indulged in the use of appointed caretaker committee to run the local government system which is opposed to the use of democratically elected officials in the administration of local government in line with the provision of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended. Relying on the use of structural functionalism theory and descriptive qualitative method of data analysis, the paper unveiled that local government administration according to the constitutional provision is the responsibility of both the federal and state governments, whether financially, politically and administratively. It was uncovered that regardless of the fact that the 1976 local government reform pronounced local government as a third tier of government, it has continued to operate without autonomy. Lastly, the use of caretaker committee in the running of local government affairs has grossly reduced it to a mere political appendage of the state governments. The paper, therefore, recommended immediate constitutional review in order to restore the status of local government as a third tier of government and strengthen its autonomous and democratic existence.

Babatope and Egunjobi (2016) focused on the activities of the state governors and the obstacles they constitute in the efforts towards democratic composition of local government councils in Nigeria. They posited that the provision of the democratic institutions and structures in the local government by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was aimed at empowering the local people politically and afford them the greatest opportunity to proffer solutions to local problems through their chosen representatives. They further argued that lack of democratically elected local government council has rendered local governments politically incapacitated by the state governors, who preferred to use caretaker committee in running the local governments. The paper recommended, among others, strong institutionalization of the rule of law, institutional checks on the powers of the state governors over undue control of the local government, and mass actions.

Similarly, Eme, Idike and Onuigbo (2017) evaluated the local government democracy in the Southeast Nigeria. They maintained that none realization of the objectives of creating local government contained in the 1976 Guidelines for Local Government Reforms was not unconnected to the pattern of control of the local governments by their state counterparts. As a result, there is continued loss of trust and confidence in the local government affairs by the local people. They discovered that due to flaws in the constitution and excessive control of the local governments by the state governors as well as corruption, local governments have remained quarantined, handcuffed and handicapped in the promotion and sustenance of grassroots democracy. Hence they recommended institutionalization of local democracy through legal instruments.

In their work, entitled “Local government and grassroots democratization in Nigeria: Issues, challenges and the way forward”, Dode and Ita (2017) examined the relevance and contributions of local governments, and their roles and challenges in Nigeria. They argued that local masses are held hostage and made irrelevant by the political elite who use local governments as objects to politically manipulate people rather than mobilizing and empowering them to actively participate in grassroots politics. The paper uncovered that local government has continued to experience unrestricted control from the state government, which has inhibited grassroots democratic development. They recommended effective mobilization, education and empowering of the rural populace to enable them to actively participate in the government process

Why Caretaker Committee in the Local Government System?

There are major factors that contribute to emergence of caretaker committee in the running of local government councils.

These include:

- i. **Contradiction in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as Amended:** The constitution provides in Section 7(1) that the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under this constitution guaranteed. The government of every state shall subject to Section 8 of this constitution ensure their existence under a law which provides the establishment and functions of such councils”. The implication of the above provision is that the management of local government council should be democratically elected. And also, despite that, the local governments are subject to the state governments. In other words, local governments cannot freely exercise their democratic powers and functions assigned to them by the constitution. This has remained a critical contributor to the dominant appointment of caretaker committee in the operation of local government in Nigeria, especially in Imo State. In the bid to make the local government subservient to their whims and caprices, some political elite like the governors have even deliberately refused to conduct local government elections but instead have put in place caretaker committees to oversee the affairs of local governments (Ezeh & Muanya, 2013).
- ii. **The Fear of Opposition by the Ruling Political Elite:** The fear of opposition by the ruling political elite engenders proliferation of caretaker committee at the grassroots level. This is because many politicians are afraid of losing election in political contestation hence they hold unto the local government councils through caretaker

committee as a means of sheltering support and loyalty (Ojo & Ihemeje, 2014) and suppressing political opponents as well as gathering resources for future political struggle.

- iii. **Lack of Specific Tenure of the Office of Elected Local Government Council:** Ananti, Onyekwelu and Madubueze (2015) and Okafor and Orjinta (2014) argue that there is lack of specification of the tenure of elected council officials in the local government by the constitution. And also, there is failure of the electoral law or even National Assembly to state duration of the term or tenure of the elected local government councils. The situation has become so bad that even where elections have been conducted, governors deliberately force the tenure of the local government chairmen to elapse early through dissolution of, and or suspension and removal of chairmen and councilor, so as to pave way for the appointment of ruling party loyalists and supporters as caretaker committee (Bolaji, 2008; Abba & Ahmed, 2012).

Democratic Autonomy and Caretaker Committee

Democratic autonomy enhances democratic values in the local government system. It makes way for the management of the local government by the elected representatives of the people. It engenders greater participation of the people in the political process of government which include, among others, election of the local government councilors and chairman by the electorate, election campaigns, political debates etc (Ogunna, 1996). Unlike local government democracy, the caretaker committee systems in the local government administration comprise non elected officials appointed by the ruling political class in the state. The use of caretaker committee in the local government is anti democratic processes and structures (Ananti, Onyekwelu & Madubueze, 2015) as it only projects the interests of a few political elite rather than the large masses.

Emphasis on democratic autonomy in the local government is propelled by the notion that it gives the local inhabitants the opportunity to take special interest in political discussions, deliberations and negotiations which is the beauty of democracy. Through this process, the local people make valuable input into the process of government; whereas in a caretaker committee, it is only unrepresentative in nature and does not encourage freedom of expression and public opinion (Okafor & Orjinta, 2013). It is therefore not people inspired and oriented.

The idea of democratic autonomy in the local government fosters wide articulation and aggregation of interest among the people. This helps the grassroots inhabitants to easily identify their needs, problems, priorities and prospects which are channelled to the appropriate level of government for consideration. This is hardly obtainable in a caretaker committee system.

Many scholars such as Diamond (1996), Ogunna (1996), Ezeani (2004), Awotokun (2015), argued that one of the greatest values of sustaining democratic autonomy in the local government is accountability. This is because local government officials (councilors, chairman) are responsible and accountable to the local people who directly voted them into power. This gives the people the right to react against bad policies, corruption and maladministration which often characterize caretaker committee in Nigeria in general and Imo State in particular (Eze & Muanya, 2013).

In another vein, as acknowledged by Kirk-Green (1965), democratic autonomy of the local government enhances political development. It provides people with political education and socialization. Unlike local government democratic autonomy, caretaker committee suppresses political education and socialization which according to Anyanwu (2011) and Okafor (2013) is largely responsible for disconnection and alienation of the people from the local government business.

It is arguable that the neglect of democratic autonomy of the local government through the use of appointed caretaker committee by the ruling elites in the management of local government councils has made local government a mere local council rather than a government (Ogunna, 1996).

Caretaker Committee System in Imo State (1999-2021)

The 1976 Local Government Reforms and the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provided, among others, democratization of local government (Ogunna, 2007). This, by extension simply confers democratic autonomy on the local governments. In 1999, following the restoration of democratic institutions and structures in Nigeria, especially in Imo State, the Governor of Imo State, Chief Achike Udenwa conducted differently two local government elections within the eight years of his administration. Within this period, the councils operated for a period of four years based on a two-year tenure. The remaining of the four years marked the decoration of the local governments with caretaker committee (Offiah & Okoroafor, 2020).

Under Governor Ikedi Ohakim, the successor of Achike Udenwa, who came in 2007, his administration could only help in packaging the local government with caretaker committee. Towards the tail end of his administration, he quickly conducted election in August 10th, 2010 and constituted democratically elected council. This shows that it took Governor Ikedi Ohakim three years and three months to ensure democratic autonomy in the local governments in Imo State (Offiah & Okoroafor, 2020).

By 2011, when Rochas Okorochoa emerged as the Governor of Imo State, his first assignment was to dissolve the democratic local government councils constituted by his predecessor, Ikedi Ohakim, and replaced them with appointed caretaker committee. Like his predecessor, Ikedi Ohakim, Governor Rochas Okorochoa, despite all the court cases against his administration on the “illegal” dissolution of the elected councils went ahead to conduct local government election on 25th August, 2018 at the twilight of his administration and constituted elected local government councils. The period from May 2011 to June 2018 of Rochas’ administration was described as the era of endless caretaker committee (Eme, Idike & Onuigbo, 2017) as there were six caretaker committees appointed between 2011 and 2018.

The exit of Rochas Okorochoa followed the emergence of Governor Emeka Ihedioha in 2019. Governor Emeka Ihedioha could not put anything in place because of his unprecedented removal from office by the Supreme Court in February, 2020. The best he did was to dissolve the so called “elected local government councils” that his predecessor Rochas Okorochoa constituted six months to the expiration of his administration.

The assumption of Hope Uzodinma in February, 2020 as the Governor of Imo State was due to the court judgment which call for the sacking of Emeka Ihedioha. Since then, it has been

an era of caretaker committee in the management of local governments in Imo State. The general impression in Imo State local government system is that the use of caretaker committee in the running of local government negates the democratic autonomy of the local government provided by constitution.

Concluding Remarks

Enduring and sustainable democratic autonomy cannot be achieved with the use of appointed caretaker committee by the ruling political elite in the running of local governments in Imo State, Nigeria. This is because the caretaker committee has no place in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended, as it is considered a political and social injustice imposed on the people by the ruling political elite. It denies the grassroots inhabitants the right of participating in governance and in electing their representatives in local government. By fostering caretaker committee in Imo State's local governments by the ruling political elite, people at the grassroots are alienated and disconnected from the governing process which makes it extremely difficult to guarantee democratic autonomy of the local governments.

In view of the above, there is an overriding need to amend the contradictions in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, especially Section 8 which subjects the local governments to the state government. Again, the term of office of the elected local government council should be clearly spelt out for clarity sake. And lastly, the paper calls for the institutionalization of democratic government in the local government councils through the use of legal instruments.

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