

Incumbency Power and Mechanisms of Control in Grassroot Politics: Examining the Gubernatorial Influence in Nigeria's Democratic Practice

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[0155] Abstract

The power of incumbency has become a significant factor in shaping grassroots democracy in Nigeria, particularly with respect to the conduct and influence of state governors. This paper examines the ways in which state governors leverage incumbency to consolidate power, manipulate political processes, and undermine democratic norms at the grassroots level. The research highlights how governors exploit state resources, control local government structures, and influence electoral outcomes to maintain political dominance. By examining key case studies, the paper explores the negative consequences of these excesses on democratic accountability, local governance, and the broader political culture in Nigeria. The findings suggest that the overreach of governors not only stifles political competition but also weakens the development of participatory democracy at the grassroots. Addressing these challenges requires stronger institutional frameworks, electoral reforms, and checks on gubernatorial authority to ensure that grassroots democracy in Nigeria thrives beyond the constraints of incumbency.

Key words: Democracy, Grassroots, Governors, Power and Incumbency,

Introduction

In many developing democracies, including Nigeria, the power of incumbency is a prominent feature of political contests, with significant implications for democratic governance, particularly at the grassroots level. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous nation, operates a federal system of government with three tiers: federal, state, and local governments. Local governments, often referred to as the grassroots level, are key components of democracy as they directly connect citizens with governance structures. Elections for local government are entrusted in the hands of different State Independent Electoral Commissions under the control of the State Governments which questions their autonomy. Jega (2013), in response to autonomy of local governments, stated that Independent Electoral Commissions have to be granted greater autonomy and provided with adequate funding. The proper functioning of grassroots democracy is vital for effective service delivery, community participation, and representation. However, the power of incumbency has emerged as a potential threat to this democratic ideal in Nigeria, where elected officials-especially at the state level exert undue influence on the local governments. Government at the state level owes the people both at the local level the responsibility of ensuring democratic consolidation. Okonkwo and Ezenwegbu (2024), rightly put it that the fact government has responsibilities towards its citizens has never been disputed and that includes ensuring people are free to exercise their rights without undue influence.

Local governments in Nigeria were constitutionally established to ensure administrative and political decentralization. The intention was to empower local communities, enhance service delivery, and foster political participation at the grassroots level. However, in practice, the autonomy of these local government units has been eroded by the overwhelming influence of state governors. This influence is largely due to the political structure, where governors control key aspects of the local government system, including the appointment of local council chairmen and the management of financial allocations.

A central aspect of this influence stems from the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, which places local governments under the purview of state governments. State governors, through their control of the State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), significantly shape the outcomes of local government elections. These commissions are responsible for organizing local council elections, but in many instances, they have been accused of conducting elections that overwhelmingly favour candidates loyal to the governor's political party. As a result, local elections often lack genuine competition, limiting the capacity for opposition parties and independent candidates to win office at the grassroots level. Dahl (1971), noted that 'democratic are all regimes that hold elections in which the opposition has some chance of winning and taking office'.

Additionally, governors exert control over local governments through financial dominance. Egwu (2015), averred that governors wield substantial control over state resources, and they often utilize these resources to build patronage networks and consolidate their political power. Although the constitution provides for the allocation of federal revenue to local governments, these funds are often channelled through state governments, creating opportunities for governors to manipulate local government finances. In many cases, governors withhold or dictate the use of these funds, further weakening the financial autonomy of local councils. This practice not only stifles local development but also prevents local government officials from being accountable to their constituents, as their political survival becomes tied to the state governor rather than the people.

In light of these challenges, the study of incumbency power and its impact on grassroots democracy in Nigeria is crucial. It seeks to explore how incumbency affects electoral competition, the quality of local governance, and citizens' participation in the democratic process. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing strategies to strengthen grassroots democracy, ensuring that it serves as a genuine tool for representation and development in Nigeria.

Methodology

This paper engaged the descriptive research design. Data were generated from secondary sources. This involved a meticulous library research and extensive interrogation of existing literatures. By and large, textual analysis was employed to analyse data. It involved careful reading, and examination of documents and written records in the light of relevant realities, narrations, patterns and meanings. It also involved the employment of logical reasoning and argumentation to organise collected data.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Marxist theory of state as its theoretical framework. Alongside the liberal theory of state, the Marxist theory of the state is unquestionably one of the most influential theories. This theory not only calls into question the foundational tenets of the liberal state but also emphasises how, in pursuit of its goals, it subjugates the majority of men in society. In the absence of its dismantlement or annihilation, the emancipation of common individuals will remain unattainable. Within this framework, Draper (1977), posits that the state comprises an establishment or collection of establishments that depend on the capacity of specialised agencies of society to exert coercive force to maintain the dominance of the ruling class, prevent fundamental transformations in the existing property relations, and subjugate all other classes. Nevertheless, an obstacle in the scholarly investigation of the Marxist theory of the state is the absence of a comprehensive analysis of the theory by Marx in any publication. It is noteworthy to mention that the Marxist theory of the State originated primarily as a reactionary framework against the liberal theories or viewpoints concerning the State (Oladipo, 1991). Liberals hold the view that the state emerged from a voluntary accord entered into by individuals who recognised that the institution of a sovereign power was the only way to shield them from the anarchy, violence, and peril that characterised the "state of nature" (social contract variant). There is a contention that the absence of a state leads to human beings mistreating,

exploiting, and enslaving one another, whereas the presence of a state ensures liberty and guarantees a civilised existence. As a result, this theory posits that the State serves as an impartial intermediary between rival social groups and individuals, in addition to acting as an arbiter who safeguards every citizen against the encroachment of other citizens. On the contrary, Marx (1818–1883) and his associate Engels (1820–1895) have formulated a multitude of observations and declarations that serve as the foundation of state theory. The initial topic of discussion will be the definition of the state. In essence, the state serves as a mechanism for class dominance. Alternatively, the bourgeoisie exploits the common people through the state; thus, the state functions as an exploitation mechanism. Lenin has additionally expounded upon this notion. In essence, the state functions predominantly as a mechanism to establish and sustain the hegemony of the affluent and influential over the impoverished. Indeed, "the state functions as a political instrument, a mechanism to preserve the dominance of one class over another, in an antagonistic class society" (Lenin, n.d., as cited in Johari, 2005).

Marx and Engels concluded, based on an examination of historical events, that the state was practically constituted in the slave society. Slavery was characterised by the existence of predominantly two social classes: slave owners and slaves. Slave owners required an organisation in order to exert control and dominance over their captives. Marxist scholars have contended that a comprehensive comprehension of society necessitates an association with the economic framework; furthermore, the state is said to originate from and, in a sense, mirror the class system (Oladipo, 1991; Heywood, 2007). In a reissued edition of "The Origin of Family, Private Property, and State," Engels (2010 [1884]), provides a comprehensive analysis of the state's origins and evolution. The state does not originate from the fabric of society. Instead, it can be described as a consequence of societal forces. "The state is not an external force imposed on society; rather, it is a product of society at a particular stage of development," he asserted.

As stated earlier, Marxists perceive the state predominantly as a tool employed by the affluent to subjugate and control the "have-nots." It solely surfaced during a particular phase of the historical progression of human civilization. An insightful facet of this viewpoint regarding the State can be deduced from the claim that its existence as a political power is not predetermined; periods of societal progress have passed without it, and as civilization progresses, a time will come when it no longer exists. During the initial phases of societal progress, characterised by rudimentary modes of production and predominantly homogeneous production relations, the necessity for a state was manifestly non-existent. This implies that the state is not an intrinsic characteristic of all human societies; indeed, societies have existed without states. This underscores the notion that there was no state in human history before the advent of private property, which emerged from the slave mode of production (Oladipo, 1991; Onimode, 1985).

The "withering away of the State" is an additional fundamental element of the Marxist theory of the State. Oladipo (1991) argues that the concept that the state will diminish at a specific juncture of societal progress is grounded in the Marxist understanding of the state's origin and essence. Since the state is founded upon the division of society into antagonistic classes and functions to mediate the strife between these classes, it will inevitably vanish when these classes cease to exist and a society devoid of social classes emerges. Engels (1969), had long maintained that the proletariat would seize control of the state and transform the means of production into state property; furthermore, he argued that once class rule and the individual struggle for survival cease, there will be no more social classes to subjugate – nothing that requires a special coercive force, a state – remains to be subjugated. He asserted that the proletariat "abolishes" the bourgeois state rather than "withering away" it throughout the revolution. Following this revolution, the proletarian state or semi-state gradually disintegrates (Lenin, 1984).

It is important to acknowledge that while the decline of the State is an unavoidable consequence (i.e., from a Marxist standpoint), this process can solely commence once the proletariat has seized control of the state and organised itself as the ruling class – which occurs after the revolutionary ousting of the bourgeoisie (Oladipo, 1991). This is the consequence of the class struggle, wherein the labourers, proletariat, and bourgeoisie, owing to their inherent contradictions with the capital-owners, would ascend, challenge, and

ultimately depose the capital-owners. As previously emphasised (Obo, 2002), the surplus value, or wealth, of the society is generated by the working class. However, the exploiting class expropriates and privatises this value; the working class is incited to revolutionary upheaval against the oppressor class due to the inherent injustice and cruelty of this action.

A frequently raised objection to the Marxist view of the State pertains to the notion that its existence will be nullified upon the eradication of social class distinctions. Since social power existed before the emergence of the state as a public authority over society, it will continue to endure in some capacity even after the state ceases to exist. Disputes that may arise in society will be resolved by this social authority (Oladipo, 1991). An additional criticism posits that characterising the state as a mere instrument of oppression and exploitation by one social class over another is fallacious, given that it is, in the Aristotelian sense, an institution dedicated to the public good whose ultimate purpose is to provide its citizens with a "good life." Furthermore, there is an argument that the element of exploitation should not be regarded as the exclusive or determining factor in the establishment and sustenance of the entire political structure, given that "many factors contributed to the formation of the kind of political loyalty that prevented the state from ever attaining maturity." There is also a contention that regarding the State as a sole instrument of coercion is an erroneous perspective (Heywood, 2007). Although it is accurate that the State employs force to subdue its adversaries and uses coercion to enforce its laws, force is not the only determinant of public obedience.

In actuality, Marx's objective was not to formulate a meticulously constructed logical theory of the state. He documented his historical observations and insights in his writing. Marx concluded after conducting an exhaustive examination of the functioning of the capitalist states of his time and deriving specific conclusions. In reality, not every capitalist state of his era assumed an identical character or functioned in the same manner. This theory is highly pertinent to this study as it enables us to grasp how the ruling class has exploited the state as a tool of exploitation. The ruling classes consist of incumbents, and the state has provided them with support in exploiting the advantage of their incumbency.

Mechanisms through which Governors Exert Control over Local Government

1. Control over State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) are responsible for organizing and overseeing local government elections in Nigeria. However, governors wield significant influence over these commissions, appointing loyalists to key positions. This allows them to manipulate the local electoral process, ensuring that candidates from their political parties win elections. In many cases, opposition candidates are either barred from contesting or elections are conducted in a non-transparent manner, with widespread allegations of rigging and irregularities. A vivid observation of local government elections conducted recently in Nigeria has shown that incumbent parties at the state level won all virtually all seats available. Dahl (1971), noted that democracy is a contestation that is open to participation but the reverse seems to be the case in Nigeria. This shows that political competition has been effectively eliminated at the grassroots level which consolidates the governor's control over local leadership.

2. Use of Caretaker Committees or Transition Committees Instead of holding regular local government elections, many governors dissolve elected local councils and appoint caretaker or transition committees to manage the affairs of local governments. These committees are typically staffed by individuals loyal to the governor or the ruling party in the state. As Davies (1998), and Okafor (2004), observed, the state governments on a number of occasions before 1987, and the presidency since 1987, have removed chairmen of Local Governments and even dissolved elected local government councils and appointed Administrators or Caretaker committee in their place. The appointment of these committees, which often operate without democratic legitimacy, allows governors to bypass elections and maintain control over local government functions. The loyalty of the appointed officials was inevitably bound to be to the appointing central

government and not the beneficiary local communities. In the same vein, when leaders become centrally imposed the way sole Administrators and caretaker committees are appointed in Nigeria, accountability is jeopardized as support for and identification with the local government and its activities become difficult to muster. The implication is that participatory democracy at the grassroots becomes elusive. This practice also denies citizens the opportunity to choose their representatives, undermining democratic principles at the grassroots level.

3. Control Over Local Government Finances Financial control is one of the most significant mechanisms through which governors exert influence over local governments. Although local governments are entitled to federal allocations, these funds are disbursed through a "State-Local Government Joint Account" controlled by state governments. The law known as 'Anambra State Local Government Administration Law 2024' is a good example. This arrangement gives governors substantial control over how local government funds are used, and in many cases, governors withhold or divert these funds for state-level projects, limiting the ability of local governments to carry out independent development initiatives. This financial dependency weakens the ability of local governments to function effectively and makes them subservient to the governor's office.

4. Political Patronage and Clientelism Governors often use political patronage to maintain control over local governments. By distributing appointments, contracts, and resources to loyalists at the local level, governors create a network of political clients who are dependent on their goodwill for survival. Governors wield substantial control over state resources, and they often utilize these resources to build patronage networks and consolidate their political power (Egwu, 2015). Through the strategic allocation of resources, they can initiate development projects that align with their political objectives. This selective distribution of state resources, often based on political considerations, can result in disparities in development across different regions and constituencies (Okoye, 2018). This system of patronage ensures that local government officials remain loyal to the governor and his political agenda, rather than being accountable to the citizens they are supposed to serve. It also raises questions about the fairness and transparency of political processes and governance (Onyishi, 2019). This form of political clientelism weakens democratic accountability and fosters corruption at the local level.

6. Influence over Security Agencies Governors, as the chief security officers of their states, also wield significant influence over state security agencies. During local government elections or political crises, governors often use security forces to intimidate or suppress opposition at the grassroots level. By controlling security agencies, governors can manipulate the local political environment, ensuring that opposition candidates face harassment or violence, while loyalists enjoy protection and support. This stifles political competition and creates an environment of fear and repression in local politics.

7. Legislative Manipulation In many instances, state governors influence state Houses of Assembly to pass laws that undermine local government autonomy. For example, some state legislatures pass laws that give governors the power to dissolve local councils or appoint caretaker committees. By using their influence over state lawmakers, governors can alter the legal framework governing local governments to ensure that they remain dependent on the state government for political and financial survival. Another instance is the recent controversial law by the Anambra State government compelling the local governments in the state to remit a portion of their federal allocation to the state government. The law known as 'Anambra State Local Government Administration Law 2024' would allow state government to share in funds meant for local government councils. Section 13(1) of the law provides that the state shall maintain a "State Joint Local Government Account," into which all federal allocations to local governments in Anambra State must be deposited. Section 14(3) of the law stipulates that each local government in the state must remit a state-determined percentage to the consolidated account within two working days of receiving their allocations

from the Federation Account. Also, Section 14(4) maintains that if the state receives the local government allocation on their behalf, it must deduct the specified percentage before disbursing the remaining funds to the local governments. This would undermine the financial independence of local governments in the state.

9. *Partisan Control* Governors often use the dominance of their political parties in the state to control local governments. By ensuring that party members loyal to them occupy key positions in local government councils, they maintain political control over local administrations. In states where one party dominates, opposition parties find it difficult to win local government elections, as the political machinery is firmly under the control of the governor and his allies. This brings us to the different forms of privileges enjoyed by incumbents. These privileges can also be seen in two forms; the incumbency enjoyed by the ruling party and that enjoyed by the candidate who is an incumbent. Those enjoyed by the ruling party are necessitated by the virtue of having a member of the party as an incumbent in power. This places the party at an advantage over other political parties. Furthermore, there are the privileges enjoyed by the incumbents themselves.

Checkmating the Excesses of State Governors

Strengthening the Electoral Commissions One of the critical measures to curb the abuse of the power of incumbency is to strengthen independent electoral commissions. The role of this electoral body in ensuring free and fair elections is paramount. Independent electoral commissions, has to be granted greater autonomy and provided with adequate funding (Jega, 2011). This autonomy must extend to financial and administrative matters to ensure that they operate independently of the government. Autonomy is crucial in preventing undue interference in electoral processes and in fostering public trust (Akande, 2013).

Electoral commissions must focus on professionalizing their staff and building their capacity (Ibeanu, 2010). This entails recruiting personnel with the necessary expertise in election management and conducting regular training programs. A professional and capable workforce is better equipped to organize credible elections (Ezegbe, 2019). Furthermore, Voter registration is a critical aspect of the electoral process. Electoral commissions should ensure that voter registration exercises are transparent, inclusive, and free from manipulation (Ijewereme, 2016). The use of technology, like biometric registration, can enhance transparency and reduce fraud. Transparent voter registration is fundamental in preventing the abuse of the incumbency factor (Onyishi, 2018).

Furthermore, the legal framework governing electoral commissions must be robust and supportive of their independence (Ojo, 2017). This includes laws that guarantee the tenure of electoral commissioners and protect them from arbitrary removal. Strong legal protections can deter government interference and ensure the independence of electoral commissions (Akande, 2013). Electoral commissions must actively engage with international organizations and election monitoring bodies (Jega, 2015). Collaborating with organizations like the UN (United Nations) and the AU (African Union) enhances the credibility and transparency of elections. International oversight can help ensure that electoral processes meet international standards (Ezegbe, 2019).

Practically, strengthening independent electoral commission is a fundamental measure to prevent the abuse of the power of incumbency. This entails enhancing its autonomy, professionalization, transparent voter registration, strong legal frameworks, and international oversight, engagement with civil society and the media, and regular election audits. These measures collectively contribute to fostering fair and credible elections, which are essential for the development of grassroots democracy.

Establishing Electoral Offences Commission Another crucial measure to mitigate the abuse of the power of incumbency is the establishment of Electoral Offences Commission. This requires the creation of a body or agency responsible for overseeing compliance and investigating violations (Ezegbe, 2019). They will set code of conduct for incumbents and monitor compliance during electoral periods for local elections in Nigeria. Establishing a code of conduct for incumbents involves defining clear and comprehensive ethical guidelines that govern the behavior of sitting government officials during election periods (Akande, 2013).

These guidelines encompass a range of principles, including the appropriate use of state resources, maintaining neutrality, and refraining from actions that could compromise the integrity of the electoral process. A well-structured code of conduct provides a framework for ethical behavior during elections, promoting fairness and accountability (Ijewereme, 2016).

The effective implementation and enforcement of the code of conduct are crucial. Sanctions for breaches of the code must also be clearly defined. A robust enforcement mechanism ensures that incumbents adhere to ethical standards, reducing the potential for abuses (Ibeanu, 2010). The code of conduct has to be made publicly available, and awareness campaigns conducted to inform the electorate and political actors about its existence and importance (Jega, 2013). Transparency and public awareness encourage vigilance and scrutiny. An informed citizenry can actively hold incumbents accountable for their conduct during elections (Ojo, 2017)

As a matter of fact, an independent body or commission should be responsible for overseeing the implementation of the code of conduct (Jega, 2015). This body should be insulated from political interference and should include members from diverse backgrounds, including civil society and legal experts. Independent oversight ensures that the code is applied impartially and without political bias (Akande, 2013). The code of conduct should be subject to regular review and updates to ensure its relevance and effectiveness (Ibeanu, 2010). The political landscape evolves, and the code must adapt to new challenges and circumstances. Continuous improvement ensures that the code remains a useful tool for preventing incumbency abuse (Ezegbe, 2019). Incorporating incentives for incumbents who comply with the code can promote ethical behavior (Ojo, 2017). This could include public recognition, awards, or other forms of positive reinforcement. Incentives encourage incumbents to adhere to the code, reducing the likelihood of misconduct (Onyishi, 2018)

Furthermore, in the pursuit of safeguarding against the abuse of the power of incumbency in local politics, legal and Electoral Act amendments also stand out as crucial measures. Amending the Electoral Act to explicitly address issues related to incumbency abuse is a fundamental step in promoting fairness and equity in electoral processes (Ujoatuonu, 2017). Specific provisions can be included to regulate the conduct of incumbents during election periods, ensuring a level playing field. The Electoral Act serves as the legal framework for elections, and amendments can provide clear guidelines against incumbency abuses (Jinadu, 2011). Legal reforms should incorporate explicit restrictions on the use of state resources by incumbents for electoral advantages (Nwabueze, 2016). This includes prohibiting the misuse of government funds, vehicles, and other facilities for campaign purposes. Legal provisions that clearly outline these restrictions contribute to a more equitable electoral landscape (Ujoatuonu, 2017). Amendments should also focus on expediting the resolution of electoral disputes to prevent protracted legal battles that could allow incumbents to remain in office despite potential abuses (Jinadu, 2011). Establishing dedicated electoral tribunals or courts can facilitate swift adjudication. Timely resolution ensures that the electoral process moves forward without prolonged uncertainties (Olowu, 2018).

Flowing from the foregoing, establishing Electoral Offences Commission which will in turn set code of conduct for incumbents is a critical measure to deter the abuse of the power of incumbency. This involves defining ethical guidelines, implementing and enforcing the code, promoting transparency and public awareness, ensuring independent oversight, conducting regular reviews, and offering incentives for compliance. When effectively implemented, a code of conduct can contribute to fairer elections and greater democratic consolidation.

Conclusion

The excessive control that governors exert over local governments in Nigeria has profound implications for grassroots democracy. It undermines the principles of decentralization, limits the ability of local governments to function independently, and disenfranchises citizens at the grassroots level. Addressing

these issues requires constitutional reforms that strengthen local government autonomy, greater oversight of state government practices, and the development of more transparent and accountable local electoral processes. Only by reducing the overreach of state governors can grassroots democracy in Nigeria be revitalized.

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