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Political Godfathers and Electoral Culture in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the change from a progressive and benevolent electoral culture exhibited by the early godfathers to self-enrichment as exhibited by the contemporary godfathers in Nigeria. It examines the factors that make such culture possible and the strategies that can curb such act. Making use of primary and secondary sources of data, the study reveals that economic reasons, greed, impact of military rule, civilization and complexity of society are the factors responsible for the change from community interest to the culture of self-enrichment through surrogates by the godfathers. It recommends that government should make the elective positions unattractive, lower the finances associated with electoral politics and give less consideration to the political godfathers in Nigerian politics.

Keywords: *Godfathers, Electoral culture, Self-enrichment, Governance, Influence*

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Introduction

Across the world, electoral politics is a system of governance that provides allocation of values for society in a liberal democracy. It does not only allow the majority of people to determine their directions but also makes the majority to articulate their views within the electoral culture.

As a result of citizens' determining the direction of governance and articulating their views in society, the Nigeria's Fourth Republic has witnessed the emergence of the godfathers in some states of the federation. These godfathers have enjoyed 'ad valorem' treatment and a strange avuncular relationship with the leadership of the Federal Government" (Ayoade, 2007) in Nigerian politics. Their relationship with

the central power and the great influence on political parties as well as society at large has enabled them to employ their resources and connections to ensure that their godsons win elections by all means. Thus, the influence of the godfathers over the years has resulted in a problematic and scary phenomenon.

Studies affirm that the first set of political godfathers were driven by community interest; therefore, they were benevolent and progressive (Gambo, 2007; Omisore, 2009; Anelwenze. 2004). Besides, they are not driven by any sense of self-enrichment through surrogates unlike the Fourth Republic godfathers that are driven by pecuniary gain through their anomic political culture. Also, historical antecedent in the Fourth Republic indicates that Nigeria has had six election cycles and one alternation of party in power. The natural expectation is that a national electoral culture which is capable of explaining the nature and character of electoral competitions and their outcomes ought to have emerged. Studies conducted have shown that elections since 1999 have not been free of violence and rigging (Awopeju, 2011; Awopeju, 2021). To corroborate that violence has been a hallmark of elections in Nigeria, Onapajo and Babalola (2020: 365) posit that “since the transition to democracy in 1999, elections have been marred by violence due to a low level of democratic culture.” Besides, the activities of godfathers have generated fear on a large-scale violence and may cause democratic breakdown or national disintegration because godfathers are yet to fully embrace the ethos and values that underlie liberal democracy. The political behaviour of the godfathers remains problematic in the Nigeria’s electoral politics. Onapajo and Babalola’s (2020: 365) examination of electoral politics in relation with their behaviour revealed this:

Driven by the “do-or-die” syndrome, the political godfathers are engaged in acts that undermined and frustrated efforts established by the Electoral Monitoring Body (EMB) to strengthen the electoral process. For instance, the party primaries for candidate selection were overwhelmed with large-scale violence and unresolved controversies.

Therefore, the activities of these godfathers have to be investigated vis-à-vis the culture of violence with a view to establishing the reasons for their acts and the impact of the exhibited culture in sustaining democracy in Nigeria. Studies such Adebisi (2021), Rasak et. al (2017), Yagboyaju (2015), Omotola (2007), Omobowale & Olutayo (2007)), etc, have investigated works on manifestations of godfathers in electoral politics vis-à-vis their importance as aspect of political and economic powers of the state. However, it is very imperative to examine the change of electoral behavior by the godfathers of the Fourth Republic in relation to that of the First Republic godfathers. The reason for focusing on this gap is that little attention has been given to the issue of godfatherism and electoral culture in Nigeria.

Therefore, this paper addresses these questions: What are the factors responsible for the change in godfathers’ interest in the community to the culture of self-enrichment through surrogates? What can be done to address the culture of self-enrichment in Nigeria? Apart from this introduction, there are six other parts. The next part presents conceptual clarification. The third part presents the methodology for the study, part four examines the theoretical framework, part five examines the history of godfatherism, part six discusses the godfathers and electoral culture in Nigeria

while part seven concludes and provides necessary strategies for addressing the culture of self-enrichment in the Nigerian politics.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Concept of Godfatherism

Godfatherism is an ideology constructed on the belief that certain individuals possess considerable means to unilaterally determine who gets party ticket to run for an election and to win in the electoral contest (Gambo, 2007). Similarly, Gambo further sees godfathers as men who have the power and influence to decide who gets nominated to contest elections and who wins in the election. According to Bassey & Enetak (2008), godfatherism connotes the power and influence of people who are politically relevant in deciding who gets nominated to contest elections and who eventually wins the election. Ikpe (2013) examines the concept as the political market where one expects investment by stating thus:

Godfathers are political investors in the political market, particularly at the level of the state, who sponsor candidates to public offices, most especially, office of state governor, in return for the right to control some proportions of the finances and powers attached to the offices.

Omisore (2009) sees it as the practice of political office seekers getting connected to an individual who is believed to have the ability to deliver a desired outcome in an electoral contest. In the context of this paper, godfatherism refers to the political bigwigs who sponsor candidates for election, manipulate electoral outcomes and expect returns from their investment on godsons.

Electoral Culture

Electoral culture refers to a segment of the political culture which facilitates and ensures that elections gain the important weight in society in the democratization process. In other words, it is a set of typical, relatively consistent knowledge, representations, guides, beliefs, attitudes, values, orientations, symbolic skills and patterns of behaviour manifested in the electoral process, and are transmitted from one generation to another generation. The latter definition is a working definition in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

In order to address the questions raised, the study explored exploratory research design. Primary and secondary sources of data were used. The primary data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). A total number of sixteen (16) sessions were conducted with different categories. These included the scholars working on godfatherism, party chieftains, civil society organisations and media personnel. Four (4) sessions were carried out with each of these categories. The justification for including different categories of people in the KII sessions is that they were conversant with the issue of godfatherism in Nigerian politics. The interviewees were purposively selected and interviewed based on questions relating to godfatherism and electoral culture during the First Republic and Fourth Republic. Also, secondary sources included the use of textbooks, journals, newspapers, internet sources, etc. Ethical consideration was also observed and the KIIs and other secondary data were content analysed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is guided by the theory of patrimonialism as explicated by Max Weber, Nathan Quimpo, Richard Pipes, Julia Adams, etc. Patrimonialism is a type of governance which ensures that every power flows directly from the leader. It sees no distinction between the public and the private domains. According to Medard (1996), patrimonialism ensures “that the whole government authority and the economic rights which correspond to it are treated as privately appropriated economic advantages.” Similarly, Weber (1978) opines that:

Ideally conceives political system based on a personal ruler who distributes offices and benefits to subordinates who in turn give him services, loyalty and support. Typically, in a personal rule, distinction between the private and public spheres is blurred or even non-existent because public authority is directly exercised to serve the ruler or office upon which the public office was given.

Scholars such as Ergas (1987), Roth (1968) & Schrader (2000) give a practical analysis of the concept. According to them, the concept is applicable to any form of personal rule in which support is maintained or generated through the distribution of state largesse, such as offices, contracts, grants, licenses, and so on, to clients and supporters. Their analysis depicts these five major characteristics of patrimonialism:

- (i) a government based on personal rule;
- (ii) lack of separation between the public and private realms for state officials;
- (iii) political offices being used as patrimonies by state officials;
- (iv) state functions conducted through numerous patron-client network; and
- (v) the exercise of public authority utilized to serve the rulers and officials occupying these offices (Ikpe, 2013: 112).

Patrimonialism is relevant or serves as a framework to this present study because of the nature and character of Nigeria state. For better understanding and for confirmation, studies carried out have shown that Nigeria is a patrimonial state (Callaghy, 1985; Theobald, 1990; Joseph, 1991). It is a state in which state officers privatize political power and state resources, and generate support through dispensation of a variety of benefits to supporters in a patron-client system. Here, godfathers invest their resources with the anticipation of recouping the amount spent through negotiation or agreement with their godsons.

HISTORY OF GODFATHERISM IN NIGERIA

Godfathers are as old as the polity itself. Hence, political godfatherism started in the 1950s with the nationalist activities. During this period, the godfathers comprised just six percent of the entire population and they championed nationalistic struggle for Nigerian independence (Coleman, 1986). In the 1960s, the phenomenon became widespread when the political leaders became political godfathers. Most of these godfathers were educated elites who had only primary education. They were respected for their knowledge and were brave in confronting the white men (Albert, 2002).

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As a result of this, they were idolised and their opinions were respected by the people from the various ethnic groups they represented. The people in their regions consulted them to join politics, and advised them to be prompt in executing good judgement in political activities. These godfathers are leaders that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. Their roles were to enlighten other Nigerians in the colonial system and to teach their followers how to disrespect the white man who wanted to rule Nigeria forever (Albert, 2002). Besides, most of the godfathers founded the political parties in their regions. For instance, the Northern People Congress (NPC) (Hausa-Fulani, Northern Nigeria), the Action Group (AG) (Yoruba, South West) and National Council for Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) (Igbo, South East) were led by Sir Ahmadu Bello, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, respectively. Apart from these people, few elder statesmen such as Mallam Aminu Kano and Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim fell into this category. Albert (2002: 87) after examining this category of people asserts thus:

These political leaders, up to the point of their death, dictated who could occupy political offices in the geo-political regions they led. They were clearing houses for political opportunities.

In the First Republic, when Nigeria experienced parliamentary democracy, most of their anointed sons were the ones that won elections. The godfathers who existed in the First Republic were benevolent and progressive in nature. The political parties evolved and were structured in a way that the lines of communication and control were well defined and misdemeanor behaviours were curtailed, contained and punished (Ayoade, 2007). Besides, party supremacy was evoked, party constitutions were set up and members abided by the rule of the party in this era. Most of the godsons of the First Republic godfathers won gubernatorial elections of the states in 1979 and 1983. These godsons included Chief Bola Ige, Chief Jim Nwobodo, Alhaji Lateef Jakande, Chief Sam Mbawke, Alhaji Balarabe Musa, Alhaji Abubakar Rimi, Chief Bisi Onabanjo, Clement Isong, Joseph Wayas, Olusola Saraki, Joseph Tarka, etc.

The era of the Second Republic witnessed an increase in the number of godfathers. This was because of the increase in the number of states. The godfathers “became more ambitious because they were converting their position into a resource generating and accumulating one” (Ikpe, 2013: 115). Some of the First Republic godfathers are still around and they have influence in many states.

In the Third Republic, the aforementioned godsons of the early godfathers became godfathers themselves. An important feature of this era of godfatherism is that many of them lacked the required commitment compliant with the godfathers that produced them. Albert (2005: 88) corroborates this by saying that “in the southwest, many claimed and still claim to be followers of Chief Obafemi Awolowo. They dress like Awolowo and profess his ideals but do something else.” Albert (2002) states that the new breeds politicians replaced the old breeds. This was introduced and heightened by Babangida military regimes. The obvious problem faced by these new breeds was that they did not have the required political profile or clout to single-handedly build themselves (Odion, 2007). Due to this, they fell back to the old breed politicians whose political values and indispensability in the political landscape were unrivalled (Odion, 2007).

The Fourth Republic “political godfathers are essentially predatory in their motivation to influence electoral politics” (Gambo, 2007: 91-92). In this era, electoral politics has assumed commercial enterprise outlook with profit as its logic of operation. Odion (2007: 12) in his opinion emphasized the implication of Babangida and Abacha regimes’ role in commercializing politics. He posited thus:

Is one of the ruinous legacies of the Babangida (1985-1993) and Abacha regimes (1993-1998). The regimes commercialized politics and made it difficult for people to get anything in Nigeria simply through hard work.

The godfathers of this era include Chief Lamidi Adedibu, Chris Uba, Dr. Olusola Saraki, Dr. Ken Nnamani, Chief Jim Nwobodo, etc. These godfathers have “no consideration for public interest in their political calculation as only those who are willing to execute their sinister agenda are carefully recruited into elective public offices” (Gambo, 2007: 91). The question that comes to mind is this: What is the difference between the first generation godfathers and the present generation godfathers?

From the foregoing, the first generation godfathers did not abuse their status as godfathers by imposing frivolous requests on their godsons as it is today (Omisore, 2009). Gambo (2006: 91) supports Omisore’s position when he asserts that “even if they were indulged in this, the scope and intensity would fade into insignificance when juxtaposed with the experience of the Fourth Republic.” Also, the early godfathers supported and nurtured their godsons positively but the present generation godfathers supported and nurtured their godsons negatively. Furthermore, the emphasis of the early godfathers was on developmental issues and not money, but the present godfathers are interested in money through their selfish act.

GODFATHERS AND ELECTORAL CULTURE IN NIGERIA

From the above discussion, it has been established that there are differences between the first generation of godfathers and the present ones. The nature of godfatherism in recent times has promoted the sense of entrepreneurial politics contrary to its traditional civic sense. This situation has made the godfathers to abuse their status compared to the first generation of godfathers, most especially in the electoral politics of an emerging democracy in Nigeria.

The entrepreneurial sense of politics encourages patron-client relationship, which is called political corruption. The question that readily comes to mind is this: What are the factors responsible for the abuse of the present godfathers’ status or why did they change from the benevolent and progressive culture to electoral culture of selfishness? In order to provide answer to this question, KIIs were conducted in this regards. A participant opined that he had not observed any change from the culture exhibited by the old generation and the new set of godfathers. He posited thus: “I am not sure there is change. There have always been patrons and there have always been 10 percenters among public office holders. The volume and intensity is only

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high.”¹ Another participant is of different opinion. He sees it from the societal dynamism. He said:

The nature of the society is responsible for the change in the culture of benevolent and progressive to the culture of surrogate through godsons. The reason is that godfathers then were grand patrons who had influence to control their tribes. Now, the society is complex with more population, as a result of this, the current set of godfathers want to control their fiefs.²

Odubanjo & Alabi (2014: 138) aptly captured the dynamic nature of society by saying that the disempowerment of people has made the social order to be complex. The implication of this complexity is that the influence of godfathers is being empowered while the masses have been depowered due to the nature of the society. Similarly, a scholar interviewed corroborated that the society is getting complex. He said:

The world political system is dynamics. The dynamism nature makes the system to be complex. What you saw over fifty years ago is not what we see today. We expect the set of godfathers to be relevant and want to dominate where they are. The numbers of godfathers have increased due to increase in population. Some of them wants to prove that they are the best and people cannot wish away their influence.³

Ikpe (2013: 121) also confirms the complexity of the society when he posits that “the socio-political environment is riddled with corruption and lack of accountability.” This situation has encouraged the godfathers and their surrogates to enter into unholy alliances to defraud the state.

Similarly, in another session, one media personnel said that the competition or power struggle is a factor responsible for the change of culture. He posited that:

Well, I see competition or power tussle among the godfathers as a factor responsible for the shift in the culture of benevolent and progressive to the culture or politics of selfishness. The increase in the numbers of godfathers in the first republic to the fourth republic responsible for exhibiting in the culture. They want to prove to the people that they are the best in ensuring a candidate wins in an election. They always exhibit the culture of electoral selfishness because they compete with each other or one another. And without them, there is nobody.⁴

According to the above assertion, the implication of competition will make it difficult for the godfathers to act as a class. This is what Joseph (1983) sees when he stated that there is a recurring problem of the inability of Nigerian elite to act as

¹ KII/Male/Media Personnel/2022

² KII/Male/Party Chieftain/Lagos/2022

³ KII/Male/Scholar/Ife/2022

⁴ KII/Male/Media Personnel/Abuja/2022

a class. Also, Ikpe (2013: 121) corroborated the above assertion when he posited that:

The result is perpetual ferocious competition between members of the elite class for domination and control. As the position of grand-patron became more relevant and powerful, many patrons contented for it, and the fight led to the elimination of weaker patrons, leaving the strong ones in the field.

Apart from the nature of the society, the media personnel who participated in a session of the KII posited that “civilization is a factor. During the early godfathers, they were not civilized. As society is becoming civilized, this civilization has brought misdemeanors”⁵ Another factor responsible for the change from benevolent and progressive culture to electoral culture of selfishness is the economic state. Poverty is endemic in Nigeria in recent times. Poverty not only affects the poor but also the elite. In other words, poverty affects the godsons and the godfathers. A lot of Nigerians are living below poverty bracket. The level of poverty is increasing on daily basis. For instance, in 1980, about 27% of Nigerians lived below poverty bracket and as at 2021, it stood at 40% (World Bank Report, 2022).

In a KII session held with a civil society organisation, a participant said:

I think to me; it is economic reason why they change from the old culture to this new one. Poverty is everywhere. Even, the so called godfathers fill the impact. The godfathers intend to acquire wealth for themselves. Nobody wishes to be poor. The godfathers are rich and they want to be getting richer”⁶

A scholar also emphasized poverty as a factor responsible for the change in the electoral behaviour. He posited that there is an assertion that “poverty induces behaviour. The impact of poverty on all is a factor that makes them to act the way they act now.”⁷ Similarly, a participant asserted that politics is now seen as an investment. According to him:

Some people like investment; and they thought within themselves that investment yields return. So, the present godfathers do not want to be poor; therefore, they make their money through surrogacy.⁸

In line with seeing politics as investment, greediness is also a factor that makes the contemporary political godfathers to change their benevolent and progressive culture to the culture of self-enrichment. The patrons struggled to control power so as to have access not only to government but also its resources, thus making “government parastatals scheduled for privatization” (Ikpe, 2013: 121). A participant posited:

Some politicians, most especially the godfathers are greedy. Experiences from states such as Oyo, Kwara, Anambra, even

⁵ KII/Male/Media Personnel/Abuja/2022

⁶ KII/Female/Civil Society Organisations/Abuja/ 2022

⁷ KII/Male/Scholar/Ibadan/2022

⁸ KII/Male/Civil Society Organisations/Abuja/2022

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Lagos show their greediness, and they have seen the largesse of state resources. They want to spend their resources with the intention of recouping it as investment. They demand for contracts, and even requesting for a number of commissioner's slots so that these commissioners can give returns as at when due. They penetrate to the extent that the government parastatals controlled by the commissioners are not left out of the manipulations of the godfathers.⁹

Furthermore, a party chieftain interviewed said that there is a clear difference in the electoral culture exhibited by the early godfathers and that of the Fourth Republic godfathers in Nigerian politics. He emphasized that oath taking is responsible for this. He further explained thus:

The difference between the godfathers of yesteryears and that of today (fourth republic) is that the present godfathers involve themselves in oath taking with their surrogates to the extent that they will go into the shrine or oracle to swear in order to ensure unalloyed loyalty of the godsons for godfathers. It entails a huge of monetisation, kickbacks or returns from the godfathers.¹⁰

From the above quotation, the factor identified as the reason why the present godfathers are driven by any sense of self-enrichment using surrogates is that of monetisation attached to their status. Similarly, Ikpe (2013) considers that the emergence of godfatherism is due to economic reason which is attached to liberalization and privatization. He stated that:

It is reasoned that patrons struggled to control power so as to have access to governmental parastatals scheduled for privatization, and to purchase them at values lower than their real prices. In wise, the godfathers would want to control both the economic and political lives of their states.

Another factor responsible for the change of electoral culture from the earlier culture is the impact of the military rule. A participant stated:

The military rule has culture of selfishness. And that has taught the present godfathers the politics of selfishness. The military rulers arrogated power to themselves and the ethos has been deposited in any average Nigerian. So, godfathers are also humans, therefore, they exhibit the politics of selfishness or enrichment to themselves.¹¹

Close to the factor of the military, a participant reiterated the politics of domination. The participant posited that "the godfathers have dominated the people politically. When it comes to electoral politics, they decide on what to do and how to do it. This has made them to wield power both on the party and the individuals in Nigeria."¹²

⁹ KII/Male/Scholar/Ibadan/2022

¹⁰ KII/Male/Party Chieftain/Osogbo/2022

¹¹ KII/Male/Scholar/Ibadan/2022

¹² KII/Male/Media Personnel/2022

Another participant examined it from the politics of desperation or *winner-take-all* syndrome by stating this:

They want to ensure that what they spent on their godsons is not a waste. To answer your question, they want to ensure they win election at all costs. You see some of them going into agreement in a sinister way. For instance, oath taking, so that their godsons keep to their agreement.¹³

In line with the above submission, Dudley (1982) is of the opinion that:

Politics became a zero-sum game in which opposition was ruthlessly suppressed, modified only by cartel agreements among the regional barons, aimed at securing their own fiefs from outside subvention and sharing out federal revenues, which became increasingly important after independence and were to be decisive with the development of oil production.

From the foregoing, the game of godfatherism is synonymous with the politics of zero-sum game. It is now encumbered with the activities of the regional barons through their agreements with their surrogates by evoking violence to ensure winning of election by all means. Findings have revealed that the factors that accounted for the change of electoral culture among the present and the old godfathers are complexity of society, civilization, economic situation, competition and struggle for power, impact of military rule and politics of desperation. These findings agree with the theory of patrimonialism. This is because the position of scholars, such as Medard (1996), Ergas (1987), Roth (1968), Schrader (2000) and Weber (1978), regarding patrimonialism is that it is applicable to personal rule which ensures that support is maintained or generated through distribution of state largesse. Besides, Medard (1996) posits that the whole government authority and economic rights tend to be treated as privately economic advantages. One of the findings of the factors that led to the change from the progressive and benevolent electoral culture to the culture of self-enrichment is that of economy.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can be inferred that the differences between the early godfathers and the present ones are evident in their manner of abusing status, nurturing godsons and the concern for developmental issues in society. It was further revealed that factors such as complexity of society, civilization, economic reasons, impact of military rule, greed and politics of desperation account for the factors that led to the shift in the electoral culture by the present godfathers. The study, therefore, concludes that the anomie electoral culture of self-enrichment that is being exhibited by the present political godfathers and thus caused debilitating effect on electoral politics in Nigeria. This culture has fuelled greed rather than patriotism, thus making the average Nigerian to see governance and government as a vehicle for exploitation and self-aggrandizement. In order to curb the culture of self-enrichment, the following strategies need to be put in place.

¹³ KII/Male/Party Chieftain/2022

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One, the government should make the elective positions unattractive and reduce the finances associated with electoral politics in Nigeria. The electoral law in Nigeria must regulate the amount a candidate gets from private individuals and must be strictly enforced with penalties. Also, the electoral law should curb the activities of godfathers involved in the culture of self-enrichment in Nigeria. The godsons consult the godfathers to throw support on them because they are financially handicapped. The godfathers are rich, have influence and wield much power over the people in their fiefs. The implication of going into agreement has made the state to be thrown into chaos through power tussle between the godfathers and their surrogates. Therefore, if the federal government makes the elective positions unattractive, those contestants that love their people will contest election and this will put an end to the culture of self-enrichment of the godfathers in Nigeria.

Two, federal government should disregard the godfathers at the states' level. The recognition given to the godfathers at the centre makes them to wield strong influence on the godsons and the electorates. In other words, there should be a disconnection between political godfathers and the incumbency. The reason is that a connection between the incumbency and the godfathers will always encourage unreliable acts that may fuel corruption and greed rather than patriotism in Nigeria.

Three, political education and enlightenment should be given to the society as regards the culture of self-enrichment by the government. This should cut across the citizens through the curricular in schools. This can be done by entrenching political education in the curricular of the various levels of education. Also, citizens should be made to realize that the acts of political godfathers have done more harm than good in Nigeria. So, political education and enlightenment must continue. This will enable the people to realize that their well-being does not lie in the hands of godfathers, but genuine democratic determinism. Therefore, school administrators should give much attention to the evil of the culture of self-enrichment. This will expose the antics of the godfathers and their greed in Nigerian politics.

Four, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should ensure that all the candidates imposed by the godfathers on the electorates are to be ascertained by their constituencies. If any of the candidates is rejected by the constituency, INEC should ensure that his/her name is removed from the ballot paper. This will cut the wings of the political godfathers in promoting the culture of self-enrichment in Nigeria.

Five, culture of good governance and free of violence in electoral process should be encouraged and imbibed by the citizens, electorates and the contestants for various positions. If the citizens imbibed the culture, they will see democracy as theirs, where participation of citizens should be encouraged without the influence and power of the godfathers in Nigeria.

Six, political parties, religious associations and the civil society in entirety should come to rescue the society by resisting the influence of the godfathers. Resistance in this sense implies that the society does not believe in them any longer and their acts should be jettisoned. When they notice that they are irrelevant in politics, the influence they wield will reduce in Nigerian politics.

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