

Political Elite Theory and Political Elite Recruitment in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper is on political elite theory, its application and relevance to political elite recruitment in Nigeria. It gives an analysis of the elite theory and further enunciates its principles, tenets, ideas, assumptions, application, strengths and weaknesses. It also traces back the issue of political elite transformation, succession or change to communal life in ancient Africa and further analyses the process of political elite recruitment in Nigeria from independence in 1960 to 2015 in the fourth republic. The paper observes that political succession in ancient and pre-colonial Africa was crisis-ridden and that the process of political elite recruitment in Nigeria since independence in 1960 to 2015 was full of flaws, manipulations and anti-democratic tendencies in allusion to basic assumptions or ideas of political elite theory. The paper therefore concludes that the elite theory is very apt, applicable and relevant as a framework of analysis for political elite recruitment in Nigeria.

Keywords: Elite circulation, leadership re-cycling, oligarchy, political elite, political mafia, political power, power broker

1. Introduction / Definition

The political elite, be it ruling or governing, refers to a group of highly distinguished persons who are characterised by exceptional performance in politics, who effectively utilise or monopolise power and who possess a sense of group cohesion as well as a corresponding esprit de corps. The political elite always excel in the ability to secure power and rule.

The elite theory can be defined as a set of ideas, principles and assumptions on the concept, structure and exercise of power. It is a theory that inquires about and elucidates on power relationships in the modern society. The theory postulates that a small group of people which can be found in the economic, policy planning and military institutions of the state is vested with overriding power.

Thus, the elite theory is based on two main sets of ideas, principles or assumptions on the concept, structure and exercise of power. Firstly, that power lies in position of authority in key economic, political and military institutions. Secondly, that the psychological difference that sets apart political elite from non-elite is that they have personal resources, for instance, intelligence, skills, and vested interest in government (Mills, 1956). Elite theory is also a theory of the state which seeks to describe and explain the power relationships in a contemporary society. The theory posits that a small minority consisting members of the economic elite, policy-planning networks and military institutions holds the most power in any society.

According to the elite theory, the small group of people with overriding power is referred to as the political elite. It is a group of people with exceptional abilities in politics and great monopoly of power. This so called power elite abounds in all societies and they always have the exceptional ability to secure power, perpetuate it and rule (Friedrich, 2014; Okonofua, 2013).

2. Proponents of the Theory

The following are some of the proponents of the political elite theory who had contributed immensely to the theory: Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), Robert Michels (1876-1936), James Burnham (1905-1987), Floyd Hunter (1912-1992), C. Wright Mills (1916-1962). Others are: Thomas R. Dye (1935 till date), G. William Domhoff (1936 till date) and Robert D. Putnam (1941 till date).

2.1 Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923):

Pareto (1935) stressed the psychological and intellectual superiority obtained by the elite. He believed that the elites were the highest accomplishers in their field and that there were two types of elite: governing elites and non-governing elites. He also opined that a political elite group can be replaced by a new one and that one can circulate from being elite to non-elite and vice versa.

2.2 Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941):

Mosca (1939) emphasized the sociological and personal characteristics of elites. He said elites are an organized minority and that the masses are an unorganized majority. The ruling class is composed of the ruling elite and the sub-elites. He divided the world into two groups: the ruling class and the class that is ruled. Mosca asserted that elites have intellectual, moral, and material superiority that is highly esteemed and influential.

2.3 Robert Michels (1876-1936):

Michels (1911) propounded the *Iron Law of Oligarchy* and opined that social and political organizations are run by a few individuals; that social organizations were elitist; and that elites have three basic principles that help in the bureaucratic structure of political organizations. The three basic principles are: the need for leaders, specialized staff and facilities; utilization of facilities by leaders within their organization; and the importance of the psychological attributes of the leaders.

2.4 James Burnham (1905-1987):

Burnham's early work, *The Managerial Revolution*, sought to express the movement of all functional power into the hands of managers rather than politicians or businessmen - separating ownership and control (Buttmore, 1993).

2.5 Floyd Hunter (1912-1992):

The analysis of power, based on the elite theory, was also applied on the micro scale in community power studies, particularly by Hunter (1953) who examined in detail, the power relationships in his regional city. He investigated the real holders of power beyond those invested with power by virtue of their political positions. He thereafter postulated a structural-functional approach which captured the hierarchies and webs of power interconnection or relationship within the city among businessmen, politician, clergy etc.

2.6. C. Wright Mills (1916-1962):

Mills (1956) developed a new sociological perspective on the concept of power in the United States. He discovered a tripod of power groups; political, economic and military- which constitute the most formidable but highly differentiated power-wielding body in the United States. Also corroborating this view, Buttmore (1993) opined that the power-wielding body is identifiable in all advanced industrial societies, whereby the mechanisms of power and overall control are concentrated and funneled into the hands of a limited and small group. Hence, the power groups as identified can serve as veritable tools to analyse the structure and exercise of power as well as its consequences in a modern capitalistic democracy.

2.7 Thomas R. Dye (1935 till date):

Dye (2000) asserted that U.S. public policy does not emanate from the masses but rather from elite groups based in Washington, D.C., such as non-profit foundations, think tanks, special-interest groups, and prominent lobbyists and law firms.

2.8 G. William Domhoff (1936 till date):

Domhoff (1967) explored local and national decision-making process in order to illustrate the power structure in the United States. He asserted, much like Hunter, that an elite class that owns and manages large income-producing properties (like banks and corporations) dominates the American power structure politically and economically.

2.9 Robert D. Putnam (1941 till date):

Putnam (1977) viewed the development of technical and exclusive knowledge among administrators, bureaucrats and other specialist groups as a potential source of power. This is more or less a mechanism by which power is tripped from the democratic process and slipped sideways to the advisors and specialists influencing the decision making process.

Based on the views expressed by the proponents of the elite theory and from the standpoint of other scholars and theorists, the central theme that runs through the theory is the concept, structure and exercise of power in any society. Politics is, essentially, a relationship between rulers and the ruled and it is defined in terms of power which exists between the rulers and the ruled (Tashjean, 2014). It is the ruling class that produces the power elite, the power wielding minority group, in any society. It is a group of achievers in politics and they are highly organized, cohesive and will do everything to secure, conserve, preserve and perpetuate power. The power elites are present in any society, no matter how small or large, old or new, the society is.

3. Basic Assumptions

The following are the basic assumptions of the political elite theory:

3.1 The elite theory stipulates that overriding and ultimate power can be found among the people who hold key positions in the economic, political and military institutions in any society.

3.2 The theory assumes that all men love power. Hence, through the elite theory we are able to understand that

those in power do not want to surrender power easily but to hold on to it tenaciously and through any means.

3.3 The theory states that all men are not all endowed alike. Hence, the emphasis on the psychological and intellectual superiority obtained by the elite. It further reinforces the psychological, intellectual and other differences that set apart the political elite from the non-elite.

3.4 The theory emphasizes inequality rather than equality in the society. It stresses the belief that the elites are the highest accomplishers in their fields and that the political elite are imbued with personal resources such as social skills, intelligence and special interest in politics.

3.5 The theory divides the society into two different groups because politics is, essentially, a relationship between rulers and the ruled and it is defined in terms of power. It is the ruling class that produces the power elite, the power wielding minority group, in any society.

3.6 The theory emphasizes the rule by the minority over the majority in any society. The society is usually ruled by the political elite, a minority group of achievers in politics who are highly organized, cohesive and will do everything to secure, conserve, preserve and perpetuate its power over a majority that is largely unorganized.

4. Weaknesses of the Theory

The following are some of the weaknesses of the elite theory:

4.1 The theory is opposed to pluralism and also contradicts state autonomy theory.

Elite theory is anti-democratic and views democracy as a fraud and a utopian ideal. It does not depend upon the majority or the willingness of a sufficient part of the citizenship to ensure accountability and transformation of the political elite through free and fair election. Rather, it relies upon the virtue and other standards of self-appointed political elite for securing responsible conduct to perpetuate or maintain power.

4.2 The theory postulates that political elites devise a variety of methods for maintaining themselves perpetually in power through re-cycling of leaders, elite circulation or perpetuation of regimes, contrary to the belief or assumption that there is the possibility of a gradual and continuous expansion of the political elite.

4.3 The theory is oligarchical and has been severally and severely criticised for its tacit support for selfish use of power by a few. Only the minority elite group is favoured by the theory at the expense of the non-elite majority.

4.4 The theory abhors equality and thrives more on inequality. It is therefore predicated on the inequalities that exist among the people and in the various segments of the society.

4.5 The theory has been criticised as more normative than empirical in content and intent. It therefore does not easily lend itself to empiricism and science of politics.

5. Application / Relevance of Elite Theory

In spite of the foregoing analysis on the weaknesses of the elite theory, it can be said to be applicable and relevant to political elite recruitment in Nigeria:

5.1 The power elite are present in any society, no matter how small or large, old or new, the society is. For instance, the power elite has been identified with those occupying key positions in the economic, political and military institutions in any country as in the United States of America. In the case of Nigeria, the economic, political and military powers are subsumed in the Hausa-Fulani aristocracy and their collaborators from other ethnic groups. However, the power elite have remained dominantly as the Hausa-Fulani aristocratic class, which exercises overriding power in Nigeria through political, economic and military institutions. However, they have collaborators from other ethnic groups.

5.2 With the aid of the elite theory, it is much easier and better to understand and appreciate the concept, structure and exercise of power in Nigeria and such other concepts as oligarchy, power brokers, mafia et cetera and their meanings, particularly in the Nigerian context.

5.3 The elite theory as a framework will help in illuminating and throwing more light on politics and other related concepts such as elite circulation, re-cycling of leaders and regime elongation or longevity in Nigeria. Through the elite theory, it becomes clear that those in power do not want to surrender power easily but to hold

on to it tenaciously, whereas, some are also out there, struggling fiercely, to gain or hijack power.

5.4 Elite theory is very relevant, particularly, in the area of political elite recruitment in Nigeria. This is so, as it will be seen later in this paper, the underlying assumptions of the theory shed more light on the process of political elite recruitment.

In the preceding analysis, a comprehensive exposition has been made on the definition, assumptions and weaknesses of political elite theory as well as its strengths, application and relevance to political elite recruitment in Nigeria. This, therefore, explains the reason why the history as well as the process of political elite recruitment in Nigeria has been one of a fierce struggle among politicians and political power seekers, usually characterized by god fatherism, militarism, thuggery, rigging, ethnicity, corrupt practices and delay judgments from election tribunals. Apart from the foregoing assertion, an attempt is further made in this paper to clearly illustrate the political elite theory as a framework of analysis on political elite recruitment in Nigeria.

6. Political Elite Recruitment Process in Nigeria

The question of who leads or rules in any society is always central in politics precisely because power is not evenly distributed. Power is said to be concentrated on the ruling minority elite otherwise known as the political elite. This is in line with one of the underlying assumptions of the political elite theory. At any given time, some individuals will have more powers than others. However, while scholars and political theorists tend to agree that concentrations of power are inevitable, they differ widely on how individuals or groups gain, maintain, wield and distribute power (Rothman, 2001). How individuals or groups gain power and become part of the power elite can be referred to as political elite recruitment. This process is well rooted in human history as well as in the history of all hitherto existing societies.

In the beginning, communal life in ancient Africa including the area now known today as Nigeria was simple, peaceful and egalitarian but the next stage of development was the emergence of patrimonial societies under the leadership of one ruler (king or chief) who exercised authority over his people supported by tradition and religious beliefs (Rothmans, 2001). Traditionally, a male child usually assumed the throne after the demise of the king or chief but where there were many ambitious male contestants to the throne, there would be succession crises. To forestall this, ancient societies did attempt to establish political succession by hereditary right as antidote of succession crisis. However, the hereditary succession mechanism for leadership succession or change and for maintaining social peace was reported to be ineffective even in the ancient world, such as China, Egypt, Rome (Burling, 1974; Service, 1975; Weber, 1978). In the same vein, the hereditary mechanism for choosing rulers was ineffective in maintaining social peace in ancient or pre-colonial Africa which featured a variety of state and non-state formations. In most of these societies, leadership recruitment, succession or change was said to be crisis-ridden (Alemazung, 2010; Chiriyanakandath, 2008; Cooper, 2002; Nolutshungu, 1992; Uya, 1987; Vansina, 1962).

From colonial Africa to date, there have been so much of socio-economic and political restructuring, due to the impact of social forces like western education, bureaucratization of colonial administration, western technology, and the introduction of values associated with the acquisition of specialized modern skills, social mobility through achievement, capital accumulation and democracy (Garigue, 1954). Thus, the modernization of African territories has been associated with the rise of 'new' and 'modern' African elites for whom acquisition of new and modern skills, education or capital were the key instrumental values in their rise to prominence.

All these had given rise to new governing elite in all spheres of government, be it legislature, executive and bureaucracy particularly in English and French speaking colonial Africa (Vine, 2014). This had therefore led to a change in the pattern of political elite recruitment, from traditional to educated elite, which actually began in the colonial era in Africa. The emergence of these new and educated elites, moreover, has been usually accompanied by a corresponding decline in the importance of the traditional elites, who generally owned their positions to ascription as the older criterion of political elite selection.

From the ancient times to date, there are three different major types of political elite recruitment namely: traditional, autocratic and democratic. The traditional and autocratic modes were gradually replaced by the democratic mode. In the post colonial era, the emergence of democracy has greatly reduced the problem of political leadership succession and dramatically changed the pattern of recruitment into political elite institutions. In Nigeria, for instance, traditional rulers who held political powers before and during the colonial era steadily lost out in the post-colonial era, as they were gradually phased-out and replaced by educated elites through democratic means. The changing pattern of political elite recruitment, through democracy, was not only peculiar to Nigeria but also was true of other African states. The traditional leaders were replaced by new set of educated people, known as modern educated governing elite, who were consequently recruited into political elite institutions by virtue of their new positions in the legislature, executive and in the government bureaucracy.

It will be strongly emphasised here that the democratic system is the current trend and is adjudged the best method of political elite recruitment in the world today. This is based on strong and competitive political

parties that sponsor candidates; credible and transparent electoral management body that organises free and fair elections devoid of rigging and any other malpractices as well as a well-informed electorate that vote candidates as political leaders. Political parties are deemed to be important agencies in making democracies stable particularly as regards political elite recruitment. Hence, fully developed political systems and stable democracies like the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) depend on well-institutionalised party systems in which rules and regulations about how political parties contest elections are well spelt-out, laid-down and entrenched.

Political parties do serve as platforms under which individual candidates contest elections. Hence, political parties sponsor candidates for various elective positions across the country and capture majority of the votes by helping their candidates to win support of the electorate and defeat other candidates. This practice continues periodically and regularly based on electoral regulations. Strong democracies benefit from strong political parties which usually attract committed and durable support from the electorate that make them win freely and fairly conducted elections, under the watchful eyes of an impartial umpire (electoral body). This is because strong political parties such as the Democratic Party and the Republican Party of the US and the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democratic Party of the UK are well-organised. They have effective communication networks, broad-based social and mass followers, ideological predictability, good connections with interest groups, and possess their own corporate identities independent of the personalities of their founders or leaders. Thus, the democratic method of recruiting political elite as explained above in Europe and America is based on well structured political parties and free and fair elections.

Unfortunately, such strong political parties as we have in the United States and in the United Kingdom seem not to exist in Nigeria or anywhere in Africa. It is also observed that strong political party system, stable democracy and other essential ingredients such as free and fair election are lacking in Nigeria. The question therefore is, why is it so? This is better analysed or explained by the anti-democratic tendencies or assumptions of political elite theory. Unlike the advanced democracies such as UK, US and Germany as well as some emerging democracies in Africa such as Ghana and South Africa, it is well observed that the process of political elite recruitment in Nigeria, so far, was not credible and transparent. The electoral process also witnessed godfatherism, militarism, ethnicity, religious bigotry, corruption, intra- and inter-party crises, violence, monetisation, thuggery, rigging, other malpractices and delayed judgments from election tribunals (Ehiabhi and Ehinmore, 2011).

Similarly, there was lack of intra-party competitions among aspirants seeking political elite positions as they were being imposed by political godfathers. Apart from this, imposition of leaders by godfathers could be responsible for the many crises or threats of impeachment in the fourth republic particularly between 1999 and 2007. This was very rampant during the period as disagreements frequently occurred between the godfathers and their godsons. Classic examples of reported cases were late Lamidi Adedibu and Governor Rashidi Adewolu Ladoja of Oyo State, Chief Chris Uba and Governor Chris Ngige of Anambra State and a host of others (Oni, 2012).

Instead of candidates emerging from party congresses, conventions or primaries, it was generally alleged that the process of political elite recruitment in Nigeria was monetized; such that candidates were imposed by godfathers for personal gains and profit motives. The point being made here is that this occurrence took place in virtually all the various states in Nigeria but was highly prevalent in some states like Adamawa, Anambra, Benue, Borno, Edo, Enugu, Lagos, Kaduna, Kwara, Osun, Oyo and Rivers States (Osumah, 2010).

An important consequence of monetized process of leadership recruitment on governance in Nigeria could be attributed to the accentuation and institutionalisation of corruption which includes the continuous greasing of palms and settlement of political godfathers, party leaders and officials. Funds meant for development projects, in some cases might have been shared among political cabals and used in settling and sustaining political godfathers. Consequently, this dastardly act which came in different forms and methods could be the main reason why Nigeria, for a long time, has remained under-developed (Nwagboso and Duke, 2013; Osumah, 2010).

The absence of intra-party competition, the preponderance of god fatherism and other manipulations could be responsible for political elite recruitment flaws in Nigeria. This anomaly has violated the rights of Nigerians to vie for political elite positions. This undemocratic attitude could be responsible for the fostering of wrong and unpopular class of leadership on the people (Olasunkami, 2010). Apart from the absence of intra-party competition and political inclusion, the political parties in Nigeria lacked healthy inter-party competitions and relations, among others.

The perceived failure of the political parties in Nigeria, particularly in their function of political elite recruitment, could be responsible for the prevalence of violence, thuggery and rigging of elections. The inability of the political parties to live up to expectation could be attributed to the reason why they resort to dubious and fraudulent means of winning elections. This could therefore be the main reason responsible for electoral crises among political parties in Nigeria, thereby leading to electoral malpractices and nullification of election results

(Dode, 2010). This view was also supported by Osinakachukwu and Jawan (2011) who opined that the 2003, 2007 and 2011 elections were massively rigged and when some of the results were appropriately challenged legally and scientifically, they were cancelled and new elections were held as a result. Examples were the 2007 gubernatorial elections held in Edo, Ekiti, Ondo, Osun and Oyo States.

Generally speaking, elections had not been peaceful, credible and transparent in Nigeria since independence in 1960. The period between 1960 and 2015 in Nigeria not only mark regime sequences and political leadership turnover since political independence from Britain but reveal the tensions between leadership succession and legitimacy. The first civilian regime unsuccessfully operated under the Westminster or parliamentary government system from October, 1960 to January 1966, when it was disrupted by a military coup. Arising from the 1964 general elections was a serious political violence due to some manipulations that necessitated a fresh election in 1965 in the Western Region. The fresh election resulted into a widespread violence and eventual military take-over of government in January 15, 1966 and subsequently a three-year civil war (1967-1970) (Osinachukwu and Jawan 2011). All these problems brought the first republic to an abrupt end.

After thirteen years of military rule following the collapse of the first republic, the military brokered a transition in the country from 1976 to 1979 for the second republic. General Obasanjo handed-over power to a civilian President, Alhaji Shehu Shagari in 1979 after a controversial election to usher in the second republic (Ehinabhi and Ehinmore, 2011). Even with the civil rule in place, the controversy generated by the 1979 election continued and got to a climax following the outcome of another controversial election in 1983. This led to a coup in December 31, 1983 and General Buhari became the military Head of State. The reason advanced by the leaders of the coup was that the 1983 elections held some months earlier were said to have been massively rigged in some parts of the country and this produced a large scale violence which led to massive destruction of lives and property (Eguavon, 2009).

The 1993 presidential election was keenly contested and the Nigerian electorate massively turned out to vote for candidates of their choice. It was adjudged to be the freest, fairest and most credible election so far in Nigeria. The military under President Ibrahim Babangida manipulated the election and rigged the people of their interest by annulling the election results considered as the freest and fairest in the history of Nigeria's election (Moshood, 2009). The 1999 general election was also keenly contested by three political parties; PDP, APP and AD which Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP later won as a former military leader and Head of State with manipulation by the military.

Corroborating the prevalence of electoral malpractices in Nigeria, Ibrahim (2007) pointed out that the 2003 and 2007 elections were massively rigged in a proportion and magnitude not witnessed before. He further opined that this included unlawful production of vital electoral documents and materials, snatching and hijacking of ballot boxes, manipulation of election outcomes, unlawful thumb printing of ballot papers, hoarding of election materials et cetera. The 2003 and 2007 elections as described above were child play when compared to 2011 elections. The 2011 elections assumed a greater calamitous dimension through the use of bomb blasts and massive killing of Youth Corpers who served as INEC ad hoc staff, particularly in the Northern part of Nigeria. Although the 2015 elections were generally assessed to be free and fair, they also witnessed some hiccups and irregularities (Ekundayo, 2016).

All the aforementioned developments in the polity, which include electoral malpractices and other manipulations, characterised the political elite recruitment process in Nigeria. The various electoral manipulations mentioned above were masterminded by the Nigerian political elite who at various times demonstrated its ability to create, recreate and convert political institutions such as the political parties and electoral commissions to permit office longevity and perpetuate special interests. The Nigerian political elite would deploy political authority to structure convenient choices that include the banishment, weakening or manipulation of democratic political institutions charged with oversight roles. Thus, the process of political elite recruitment was fraught with manipulations by the political elite, just as the political elite theory postulates that the political elite will devise a variety of methods for maintaining themselves perpetually in power through perpetuation of regimes, elite circulation or re-cycling of leaders and other means such as oligarchy, power brokers, god fathers or political mafia. These are some of the criticisms levied against the elite theory and they underscore the cumulative ability of the political elite to act in concert and protect their interests. This ability is exceptionally enhanced by their dexterity, common appearances and interests that facilitate cohesion, esprit de corps and mass control. This is more or less a confirmation of political elite dominance in Nigeria.

7. Conclusion

With the aid of the elite theory it is much easier and better to understand and appreciate the concept, structure and exercise of power in Nigeria and such other concepts as oligarchy, elite circulation, re-cycling of leaders, power brokers, mafia etc. and their meanings, particularly in the Nigerian context. Thus, the elite theory as a framework has helped in illuminating and throwing more light on the process of political elite recruitment in Nigeria. The theory has been criticised to be anti-democratic as it views democracy as a fraud and a utopian ideal

as it does not depend upon the majority but rather on the minority of the citizenship to ensure elite recruitment or transformation. It is not based on free and fair election. Rather, it relies upon the virtue of self appointed political elite for perpetuating or maintaining power. No wonder, elections in Nigeria from independence in 1960 to date have not been free and fair. The fact that elections are not only violently disputed but openly rigged and officially recognized by the Nigerian governments shows the significant impact of force, fraud and authority in reproducing irresponsible leaders, regime perpetuation or longevity, re-cycling of leaders and elite circulation in Nigeria.

Through the theory, it is crystal clear that those in power do not want to surrender power easily but to hold on to it tenaciously, whereas, some are also out there, struggling fiercely, to gain or hijack power. The resultant effects are; god fatherism, militarism, political violence, corrupt practices, rigging, other electoral malpractices, perpetuation of regimes, elite circulation and recycling of leaders et cetera. Thus, the political elite theory as a theoretical framework has been succinctly used in analysing the political elite and in explaining the process of political elite recruitment in Nigeria. This article has, therefore, analysed Nigeria's political elite in terms of structure and exercise of power as well as the process of recruitment. It has also illustrated that the elite theory has empirical and theoretical depth. In summary, the elite theory is very apt, applicable and relevant to political elite recruitment in Nigeria as a framework for analysis.

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