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THE IMPACT OF STATE GOVERNMENT POLITICAL INTERFERENCE ON THE FINANCIAL AUTONOMY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examines the impact of state government political interference on the financial autonomy of local governments in Nigeria. Local governments are expected to be autonomous entities responsible for providing basic services to grassroots communities. However state government political interference consistently undermined their financial autonomy hindering their ability to effectively discharge their constitutional responsibilities. The study reveal that political interference from the state government manifest in various forms including illegal deduction of fund from the sources, imposition of unnecessary projects and programme. Interference in the management of local government finance and delay in releasing allocated fund, resulted in reduced financial resources for local governments, inability to execute development projects and inefficiency in service delivery. This study adopted qualitative research design using phenomenology and semi structure interview with purposively selected informants for data collection. The study recommends that strengthening legal frame to protect local government autonomy, established independent revenue allocation committee, encouraging community participation in local government affairs and implementing fiscal federalism to reduced dependence on state government.

Key words: Local governments, Local government financial autonomy, State government Political interference

1. Introduction

Political interference transpires when political leader(s) interfere with decision making in public administrative matters in the area of planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting as well as allocation and use of public funds. Consequently Hoque, (2020) in the supply of roads, schools, hospitals in the developing countries, politics plays a role. Among various leadership challenges facing low developing democratic countries especially African countries is the political interference in administrations (Wangwe, 2022).

In many African countries, the public becomes a platform and the politicians want to maintain their faction in it and try to extend their domain in every other section of the public administration. Thus because of the political activities in the administration and the undue influence of the politicians the public and administration institution gets politicized (Bendor, et al 2020). According to Duch et al (2021) politicization of the public administration institution involves the appropriation of administrative structures and resources and the displacement of administrational goals by organized political and community interests.

Nigeria is a country which operates three tiers of governments where the power is shared between federal, state and local governments, include, political, financial, judicial and administrative as enshrined in the country's constitution (Habibu, 2020). The idea of local government councils was born out of the need to bring government closer to the people as a mechanism for stimulating socio-economic development at the grassroots level (Ehigiamusoe & Fadila, 2015). Section 7 of the 1999 constitution declared that a system of local governments should be governed by democratically elected local government councils. It further stipulated that it is the duty of the local government council to participate in economic planning and development of their local governments area (Ehigiamusoe & Fadila, 2015).

Hence, local governments were created and mandated to exercise financial, political and administrative powers. Strengthening this argument, the definition of local governments given by the constitution states that "government at local level exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas" (Lamidi & Fagbohun, 2013:4). These powers give local governments councils substantial control over local affairs to initiate and direct the provision of services as well to complement the activities of the state and federal governments in their areas (Lamidi & Fagbohun, 2020).

In order to enable the local government perform its functions as stated in the fourth schedule of the constitution, mandated national assembly to make provision for statutory allocation of public revenue to local governments council throughout the federation (Adejo, 2020). Similarly, Section 162 (Sub-section 6) of the same constitution provided for the establishment of state and local government joint account into which all allocations to the local governments council within the federation should go directly through states account before disbursement into local governments account (Ehigiamusoe & Fadila, 2015). The constitution went on to state that the amount standing to the credit of local government councils of a state shall be distributed among the local governments council.

Similarly, on the resumption of civilian democracy in 1999, many state governments succeeded in adoption of the sections of the 1999 constitution and initiates state and local government joints account system. Therefore, they consequently set-up the joint account system in their respective states (Eme & Ewuim, 2013). With the implementation of joint account, state governments politically interfere and initiated deductions from their monthly allocations to the extent that 60 percent of their funds are directly deducted for the benefit of state governments in financing their unnecessary projects that is now within the local government's area of jurisdiction (Jumare, 2014). Hence this unmeritorious deduction distracted funds for local governments in providing service delivery meant for the development of their areas. In other words, the deduction has contributed significantly to the abysmal performance of local governments in providing effective service delivery to the community (Okafor, 2010). This has constrained the financial capabilities of local governments to provide a better, efficient and effective social services to the grassroots (Boris, 2015).

Before the implementation of joint account system local governments access their financial allocation directly from the federation account (Okoli,) 2013 which presented the local governments an opportunity to deliver services to the local people with the implementation of joint account state governments rendered local council financially impotent, hence incapable of providing basic needs at various communities to meet the expectations of the people (Eboh & Diejomaoh, 2018; Ibok, 2021). Lack of financial autonomy (Adeyemi, 2022) of the local governments and the issue of the joint account has made it more difficult for many appointed chairmen to channel the little available scarce resources generated or allocated to them by the federal government towards development of many projects and programs in the rural communities (Ukonga 2023). Ibok (2021) pointed out that: aside from the fact that statutory allocations and grants from the federal and state governments to the councils are inadequate, the problem is exasperated by the low revenue generation capacity of the local government. Associated with this problem again is also irritated by the frequent sundry deductions of funds by the state governments from the councils' monthly allocations. Worst still is the failure of most of the state governments to remit 10% internally generated revenue accrued to the state monthly as mandated by the constitution this situation grossly irritating that many local governments council cannot pay staff salaries not to talk about the basic need.

To identify the impact of state government political interference on the financial autonomy of Local Government in Nigeria

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Definitions

The concept of Local Government

In Nigeria and other federal systems that operate three levels of government, the Local Government is sometimes referred to as the last and third tiers of government. In order to exercise and carry out its constitutionally mandated responsibilities and duties, it is an independent level of government established by the constitution that collaborates with higher levels of government, particularly the state. Popular among the definition of Local Government is the submission of Anifowose and Enemuo (2018) that Local Government is the lower level of government in modern state that is legally distinct and has powers to raise revenue and undertake constitutionally assigned responsibilities under a leadership that is elected and answerable to the local population.

The accurate definition or meaning of concepts has varied across many scholars particularly in social sciences. Because of this context, it attracted the attention of numerous well-known and widely respected researchers who have studied and characterized it. Ola (2018) in his contribution defined local government as a political sub-division of a nation, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs including the powers to impose taxes or to exact labor for prescribed purpose. According to Blair (2019), local government is rather a resident population occupying a defined area that has a locally authorized and governing body; a separate legal entity, the power to provide certain public or governmental services, and a substantial degree of autonomy adding legal or actual power to raise part of its revenue. The Guidelines for Local Government reform (1976), defined local government as government at the local level established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas (and) to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement project so as to complement the activities of the state and federal government in their areas, and to ensure that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized. In this case therefore, much emphasis is placed on peculiarity of the tier, and the capacity based on knowledge of the area to initiate and execute services that are much needed by the people in that locality.

Abada (2022) posits that local government is the tier of government closest to the people and it has constitutional powers to exercise control over the affairs of people in its area of jurisdiction. The powers exercised by local government gained first and foremost recognition from the Guidelines for Implementation of 1976 Local Government Reform (Erero, 2021).

In essence, local government provides the community with a formal organizational framework, which enables them to conduct their affairs effectively for the general good. What it portends, according to Abubakar (2019) is that local government is governmental administrative units' closest to the people, or in general parlance, the grassroots. The additional implication is that power devolves from the national and state governments to the localities in order to accommodate the interests of the local setting in governance and development. Alo (2021) alludes to the foregoing assertion and notes that, States or nations that aspire for development have to ensure decentralization of functions and power to lower levels to accommodate grassroots needs and interests. There is no consensus on the definition of the term local government. Each definition derives its substance from the nature of subdivision of administrative units in a country, the type of political institutions and authority system put in place, or of course, the nature of legal instrument, how it applies to units of authority and the layers of governance process in the State.

State Government Political Interference and Local Government Financial Autonomy

The capability of local governments to perform developmental functions, mostly in federal systems like Nigeria is facilitated by the nature of the relationship between the federal, state and local government to operate as true units of self-autonomous government and function effectively (Philip, 2010). Generally, the problem in this respect rotates around the degree to which the local governments are considered truly as the third tier of the political structure or as mere parts of the state governments and the nature of distribution of powers and resources among the three tiers of government (Philip, 2010). In Nigeria, the relevant constitutional provisions in respect of these relationships seem inadequate and unfavourable to the local government.

Similarly, over the years, the local government administration has been encountering series of developmental and economic challenges where different policies have purified the councils incapacitated to discharge their constitutional mandates. The annexation of the local government revenues by the state government in the name of joint state and local government accounts has been found to be an unjust treatment (Eshenake, 2013).

Consequently, this issue of state and local government joint account, which is believed as the factor that the state government used to interfere in the administration of local government contributed imminently in paralyzing the financial autonomy of local governments. State and local government joint account is a special account created by the Nigerian constitution and maintained by each state into which allocation shall be paid to the local government council through the state government directly from the federation account (Okafor, 2010).The formation of the state joint local government account system has been initially proposed with good intention during its establishment. However, this financial policy fall into the hands of aggressors to the fact that the objective of the joint account became overpowered as the supervision of the account by the state governments provided a flue for manhandling the account (Nwogwugwu 2015). The local government suffered from the state government injustice through deduction, delay in the release of allocation to councils and diversion of funds into private use, this impacted negatively to the local governments in provision of services delivery in the area of infrastructural development social security to the people and employment generation (Nwogwugwu, 2015).

Local government joint account also provided for the modalities of its operations to make sure financial self-control and the fact that no local government is politically relegated in favour of other local governments by the state government as the supervisory body (Eme & Ewuim, 2013). The section 7 and 8 of the 1999 constitution which provided the provision of creation of state and local government joint account and placed local government under state control, lead to local governments could not able to exercise the function assigned to them. (Admin, 2015). It is not doubtful that the objective of those who initiated the joint account system as a financial policy for the local government was good. The joint account system was established to evade any probable manipulation of the account by the state government (James, 2014). But the problems associated with the joint account system includes an illegal deduction from local government statutory allocation delay in the release of local government statutory allocation and diversion of local government statutory allocation which impacted negatively for the provision of service delivery (James, 2014).

From the foregoing, the idea of creating local government is to ensure that government functions and duties are felt at the grassroots and to also ensure the active participation of the local people in their own affairs. But due to alleged misappropriation of funds, money laundering and similar offences, the federal republic of Nigeria provide a section that recognized state and local government joint accounts. This is to ensure effective disbursement of fund and to checks and balances, but there is now a counter allegation that the money meant for local governments is also squander as state governments indulge in financial recklessness, through deduction and controlling their fund which resulted to poor performance in the area of service delivery such education, health, employment generation, settlement of both workers and pensioners and access to good roads.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The politics of local government autonomy, deriving from its diverse nature, is better illustrated with pluralism theory, although in some respects, the explanation could draw some significant meaning from the perspective of elite theory of politics. Generally, elitism assumes that a community's affairs are best handled by a small subset of its members and in modern societies; such an arrangement is in fact inevitable (Maloy, 2020). Admittedly, elites play leadership roles in a society and decide what happens in the economy and the polity. It is for similar reason that the elite class is basically more pronounced in the agitation and surreptitious politics surrounding the quests for local government's creation and consequently, strategically position themselves to control the local government's leadership for their pecuniary interests. They front this agenda and make significant impact based on the fact that:

i. their power is concentrated;
ii. the elites are unified;
iii. the non-elites are diverse and powerless;
iv. elites' interests are unified due to common backgrounds; and
v. positions and the defining characteristic of power is institutional position.

Although much interference in local government's administration and leadership are driven by elites, there are irrefutable evidences that show a contrary perspective on the issue of politics of local governments financial autonomy in contemporary Nigeria which comes from diverse sources, comprising elites and the general public. The diversity of actors situates and rationalizes pluralism theory for the discourse. Pluralism theory depicts the system as functioning based on clusters of competing forces that emanate from combination of elites and non-elites alike. It proposes more than one system of power, a tradition that emphasizes how multiple major social groups and interests have influence upon and various forms of representation within more powerful sets of rulers, contributing to decently representative political outcomes that reflect the collective needs of a society (Dye, 2018; Deric, 2019).

3. Methodology

The research adopted qualitative research design using phenomenology to understand and describe how social phenomenon transpires in particular setting. Phenomenology in this regard, phenomenon is a confined system and it is used to study a programme, events or an activity of individual bounded by specific time or place (Merriam, 2002). The data was collected through the semi structure interview with purposively selected informants the criteria used for selecting informants include past knowledge and experience, ability to participate and working with the local government. The data analyzed by transcribing the complete data collected from the interview and recording during the interview, then followed by categorization of data by context and interviews which were coded from number one to ten and redefined the concepts and theme into specific category.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Lack of Funds for development programme

Lack of funds for development programme is another sub-theme that emerges after grouping and regrouping various themes.

> *"Despite the constitutional provision that provides the separate allocation to both state and local governments, the problem is local governments allocation has to pass through this account before the final disbursement which served as an advantage to state government to control local government's funds and their spending without giving the local governments their full allocation from the federation account every month" (Informer2).*

Another similar view from informants asserted that state government depends heavily with local government funds for the payment of unnecessary projects,

> *"Lets me sight an example with Kaduna state, in which all the twenty-three local government's allocations were control by the state government. Though the state and local government have their different account operated, the state government stops spending from its allocation and depend heavily on local government's allocation where they need quick fund to sponsor projects or give contracts on behalf of local governments and then claims executing them (Informer 7).*

Another similar view from another informer maintained that local governments funds were control because of the refusal of the state government to conduct local government election instead ruling local government with care takers who dully answerable and were control by the state government because they were not elected.

> *" While with caretakers the state government have the opportunity to control local government spending, it's obvious any local government officials that refuse to take any directive from the state government he will be sack and another caretakers will be appointed since they were not elected"(Informer1).*

Another related view from informer specified that;

> *"With state government political interference the local governments were under-funded while effective planning and budgeting have become impossible."(Informer5).*

Another informer maintained that most of the local government spending was controlled to the extent that they will not spend 50% from their allocation.

> *"Do you knew were the problem is? Most of the local governments were restricted to the extent that they will not spend 50%; from their allocation." (Informer6).*

The finding that is discovered here is that main reason for the state government interference is to control the local government's fund through the implementation of state and local governments' joint account. This phenomenon is hugely advantageous to state government, at the detriment of local governments. The state government denied the local government access to their allocation because constitutional provision does not allow for direct funding of local governments from the federation account. This has formed a genuine foundation for the recognition of the state government political interference. This situation is quite unfortunate because most of the local governments could not get access to their allocation; state government assimilated their account in to one single account, and has dominated decisions in the distribution of various allocations to local governments.

For example, local governments are restricted to access their money to extent that they will not spend 50% percent out of their total allocation, despite the fact that they received monthly allocation from federal government; they were restricted and controlled for not having complete access to their funds. The state government limited their spending which is outside the constitutional provision. Most of the informants believed that limitation or restriction of the local governments to get access to their money is unconstitutional. The constitution permits joint account only for monitoring and evaluation of the financial activities of local government but not restricting them to use their allocation. This situation is vehemently accountable for the under-funding problems that local governments.

For instance one of the informer believe that local governments fund is controlled and under-funded while effective planning and budgeting have become impossible they were made to shoulder responsibilities that is not constitutionally theirs. They informants argued that wherever you witness projects implemented by the various state governments is from the local government's funds; by forcing local governments to pay for that project and even sponsoring of electioneering and political party loyalist without their consent which is quite. Local government are supposed to be independent, but unfortunately, state government spent the council's funds the way they like, and this has great effect on the local government financial autonomy (Eme et al., 2013).

This means by controlling their funds, local governments are facing major challenges in implementing the developmental programme. In other words, the inability of local governments to engage in any meaningful development is as a result their funds being controlled in such a way that two-third of their monthly allocations is controlled and used to fund unnecessary projects on behalf of the local governments (FUNSHO, 2013).

The accumulation of the allocation of local governments' fund being controlled is almost 50% percent of their revenue which is used for unnecessary spending on projects that have no direct impact to the people. This situation unfortified the local governments to meet off the higher expectations of the people and is a challenge for local government to have financial autonomy, and to deliver some functions that the constitution assigned to them. This is because state government is reluctant to release the fund available to local governments for the infrastructural development in which the structure of local government remained interfered and subordination by State governments. The finding correspond with the elite theory which admittedly, that elites play leadership roles in a society and decide what happens in the economy and the polity. It is for similar reason that the elite class is basically more pronounced in the agitation and surreptitious politics surrounding the quests for local government's creation and consequently, strategically position themselves to control the local government's leadership for their pecuniary interests.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, literature and experience have made it clear that political interference is undermining local government administrative autonomy over personnel management. The degree of external influence and intrusion in the local government personnel management by politicians and the higher levels of government is worrisome and needs to be addressed. One finds a situation where intellectually weak personnel with no exposure are employed through party affiliation to occupy sensitive positions in the local government. One cannot give what he/she does not have. The result has always been a failure in performance and an increase in the suffering of those who are meant to benefit from their services. The performance of politically induced appointments always leads to poor productivity, inefficiency, and ineffectiveness to the local government.

Therefore, the local government personnel management should be allowed a free hand to carry out its constitutional assigned function of recruitment, appointment, promotions, and posting of its staff. Constant interference in the issue of recruitment, appointment, promotions, and posting by political office holders and other top government functionaries should be minimized or completely stopped to ensure formidable recruitment, appointment, promotions, and posting that will lead to good governance in local governments and also ensures effective formulation and execution of government policies geared towards the betterment of the living condition of the populace.

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Sequel to the findings of this study and the conclusion drawn above, the following recommendations were offered:

Review the constitution and delineate areas of inter-governmental frictions in the administrative management of local government especially in the areas of employment, selection, and posting of personnel.
Give local government its full administrative autonomy.
Strengthen the process of recruitment, selection, and posting by way of giving the function an enabling environment for enhanced competence and this can provide the needed buffer to guide against unnecessary interference from politicians and higher government officials.

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