

PERCEPTION OF POLITICS AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN ITESIWAJU LOCAL GOVERNMENT, OYO STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perception of politics in Oyo State, using Itesiwaju Local Government Area as a case study. The study was undertaken in response to growing public concern about citizens' attitudes toward politics and governance at the grassroots level in Nigeria. The objectives of the study were to examine the nature of politics in Itesiwaju Local Government Area, assess residents' perception of political leadership, determine the relationship between politics and development, evaluate the level of political participation among residents, and identify challenges affecting effective political governance. The study adopted a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary instrument for data collection. Findings from the study revealed that politics in Itesiwaju Local Government Area is largely elite-dominated and election-centered, with limited engagement between political leaders and citizens outside election periods. Respondents generally perceived politics in Oyo State as characterized by poor accountability, unfulfilled campaign promises, money politics, and weak development impact. The study found that political participation, particularly among youths and women, remains limited, while state-level political influence constrains the autonomy and effectiveness of local government administration. The study concludes that the negative perception of politics in Itesiwaju Local Government Area is largely shaped by leadership performance, governance practices, and limited citizen involvement. It recommends strengthening political accountability, promoting political education, reducing money politics, enhancing youth and women participation, and improving local government autonomy to foster positive political perception and effective grassroots governance.

Keywords: Governance, Politics, Power, Leadership, Local government

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INTRODUCTION

Politics plays a central role in the organization and administration of societies, as it determines how power is acquired, exercised, and utilized for governance and development. In democratic systems, politics is expected to promote representation, accountability, and equitable distribution of resources. However, in many developing societies, including Nigeria, politics is often perceived negatively due to issues such as corruption, poor leadership, and weak governance structures.

In Nigeria, the local government system was established to bring governance closer to the people and promote grassroots development. Local governments are constitutionally recognized as the third tier of government and are expected to provide basic services, enhance political participation, and ensure effective administration at the community level. Despite these expectations, the performance of local governments has remained a subject of public debate, particularly regarding their effectiveness and accountability.

Oyo State, located in the southwestern region of Nigeria, has experienced diverse political dynamics shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Politics in the state has been characterized by intense competition, strong party influence, and significant involvement of political elites. At the grassroots level, these dynamics directly affect local government administration and citizens' perception of politics.

Itesiwaju Local Government Area, predominantly rural in nature, presents a unique context for examining political perception. Like many local governments in Nigeria, Itesiwaju faces challenges such as limited development, political interference, low political participation, and inadequate

service delivery. These challenges have contributed to how residents perceive politics and political leadership at both the state and local levels. Understanding these perceptions is essential for improving democratic governance and fostering effective political engagement.

The main objective of this study is to examine the perception of politics in Oyo State, using Itesiwaju Local Government Area as a case study. The findings of this study will be significant in several ways. It will contribute to existing literature on political perception and local government administration in Nigeria, particularly at the grassroots level. The study will also be useful to policymakers and government officials in understanding citizens' attitudes toward politics and governance, thereby informing policy reforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Politics

Politics is a fundamental aspect of human society, concerned with the distribution and exercise of power, authority, and resources. Scholars have defined politics from different perspectives. Easton (1965) defines politics as the "authoritative allocation of values in society," emphasizing decision-making processes and the role of authority. Lasswell (1936) conceptualizes politics as the determination of "who gets what, when, and how," highlighting competition over scarce resources.

In democratic societies, politics is expected to promote representation, accountability, justice, and development. However, in many developing countries, including Nigeria, politics has often deviated from these ideals. Nigerian politics is frequently characterized by intense competition for power,

personalization of political office, godfatherism, and the pursuit of private interests over public good.

At the local government level, politics directly affects citizens through leadership behavior, policy implementation, and service delivery. Consequently, the manner in which politics is practiced significantly influences how it is perceived by the people. When political leadership fails to meet citizens' expectations, politics is often viewed as exploitative and self-serving.

Concept of Perception

Perception refers to the process through which individuals interpret, organize, and assign meaning to events and social realities based on their experiences, beliefs, values, and environment. In political studies, perception is crucial because it shapes citizens' attitudes toward political institutions, leaders, and processes.

Political perception determines whether citizens view politics as legitimate, inclusive, and beneficial or as corrupt, exclusive, and irrelevant. Positive perception encourages trust, participation, and cooperation, while negative perception leads to apathy, cynicism, and political disengagement.

Citizens' perception of politics is influenced by several factors, including leadership performance, transparency, accountability, fulfillment of campaign promises, fairness in elections, and responsiveness to public needs. At the grassroots level, daily interactions with political authorities and the visible impact of governance play a significant role in shaping political perception.

Concept of Local Government

Local government refers to the third tier of government established to bring governance closer to the people at the grassroots level. In Nigeria, local governments are constitutionally recognized under the 1999 Constitution and are assigned responsibilities such as provision of basic amenities, maintenance of local infrastructure, primary healthcare, primary education, and promotion of community development.

Scholars argue that local government is the foundation of democratic governance because it provides opportunities for citizen participation and ensures that government policies reflect local needs. When local governments function effectively, they enhance citizens' confidence in governance and promote positive political perception.

However, in Nigeria, local governments often face challenges such as limited autonomy, financial dependence on state governments, corruption, and political interference. These challenges undermine their effectiveness and contribute to negative perceptions of politics at the grassroots level.

Local Government and Grassroots Governance in Nigeria

Grassroots governance refers to governance practices that directly affect people at the community level. In Nigeria, local governments are expected to serve as vehicles for grassroots governance and rural development. They are meant to encourage political participation, accountability, and inclusive decision-making.

Despite these expectations, grassroots governance in Nigeria has been largely ineffective. Studies indicate that local governments often lack financial independence and administrative capacity. State governments frequently interfere in local government affairs, weakening their autonomy and accountability to the people.

As a result, citizens often perceive local governments as extensions of state political structures rather than independent institutions serving community interests. This perception contributes to widespread distrust and dissatisfaction with politics at the local level.

PERCEPTION OF POLITICS IN NIGERIA

Several studies have shown that citizens' perception of politics in Nigeria is largely negative. Politics is often associated with corruption, dishonesty, manipulation, and personal enrichment rather than public service. Electoral malpractice, unfulfilled promises, and lack of transparency reinforce this negative image.

At the grassroots level, political perception is shaped by visible development outcomes. When citizens do not experience improvements in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities, they tend to view politics as ineffective and irrelevant to their lives.

In rural communities, such as Itesiwaju Local Government Area, limited access to political information and weak engagement between leaders and citizens further deepen negative perceptions of politics.

Political Participation at the Grassroots Level

Political participation refers to citizens' involvement in political activities

such as voting, attending meetings, campaigning, contesting elections, and expressing political opinions. Democratic theory emphasizes participation as essential for accountability, representation, and legitimacy.

In Nigeria, grassroots political participation remains relatively low. Many citizens participate only during elections, while continuous engagement in governance processes is limited. Youths and women, in particular, face barriers such as poverty, cultural norms, lack of political education, and exclusion from political networks.

Low participation contributes to negative political perception, as citizens feel disconnected from decision-making processes and powerless to influence governance outcomes.

Role of Money Politics in Shaping Political Perception

Money politics refers to the use of financial resources to influence political behavior, electoral outcomes, and access to political power. In Nigeria, money politics manifests through vote buying, patronage, bribery, and excessive campaign spending.

Scholars argue that money politics undermines democratic values by shifting focus from policies and competence to financial inducements. At the grassroots level, money politics reinforces the perception of politics as transactional and self-serving.

When citizens associate politics with immediate financial gain rather than long-term development, political participation becomes opportunistic rather than civic-oriented, further weakening democratic culture.

Influence of Traditional Institutions on Local Politics

Traditional rulers play significant roles in local governance and political mobilization, particularly in rural communities. Although traditional institutions are expected to remain politically neutral, they often influence political decisions through advisory roles and community leadership.

Their involvement can promote stability and political awareness, but it can also reinforce elite dominance and political manipulation. In many Nigerian communities, traditional leaders remain key actors shaping citizens' political perception and voting behavior.

Gender and Youth in Politics

Women and youths constitute a large proportion of Nigeria's population, yet they remain underrepresented in political leadership. Cultural barriers, economic inequality, limited education, and political violence discourage their participation.

The marginalization of women and youths contributes to the perception of politics as exclusive and inaccessible. Inclusive political participation is therefore essential for improving political perception and strengthening democracy at the grassroots level.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Elite Theory

Elite Theory posits that political power is concentrated in the hands of a small group of individuals who dominate decision-making processes. According to Pareto and Mosca, elites control political institutions and shape policies to protect their interests.

This theory is relevant to this study because politics in Itesiwaju Local

Government Area is perceived as elite-driven, with limited citizen influence on governance decisions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design. This design was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of respondents' opinions, experiences, and perceptions regarding politics and governance at the grassroots level. Qualitative research enables the researcher to capture subjective meanings and interpretations that cannot be adequately measured using quantitative methods alone.

The population of the study comprised adult residents of Itesiwaju Local Government Area. This included men and women of voting age who have resided in the area for a reasonable period and are therefore familiar with political activities and governance within the local government. The population also included individuals from different occupational, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds to ensure diversity of opinions and experiences.

A total of ninety (90) respondents were interviewed for the study. The sample size was considered adequate for a qualitative study, as it allowed for detailed and meaningful analysis of respondents' views while ensuring manageability of data.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Nature of Politics in Itesiwaju Local Government

The responses indicate that politics in Itesiwaju Local Government is largely elite-driven and seasonal. Most respondents described political activities as being dominated by local leaders and political elites, with increased visibility during election

periods. This suggests that politics is not deeply institutionalized in everyday governance but is rather perceived as an activity tied mainly to elections. The competitive nature of politics also contributes to tension and division within communities.

General Perception of Politics in Oyo State

Respondents generally perceive politics in Oyo State as characterized by power struggles, unmet expectations, and mixed feelings of hope and disappointment. While politics is acknowledged as necessary for governance and development, many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with how political power is exercised. This perception reflects a broader skepticism toward political actors and institutions across the state.

Politics and Development in Itesiwaju

Interpretation of responses shows that politics has made limited contributions to development in Itesiwaju Local Government. Although some respondents acknowledged minor improvements, the majority emphasized slow progress and uneven distribution of development projects. Development efforts are often perceived as selective, benefiting certain communities more than others, usually based on political considerations.

Relationship Between Politicians and the People

The findings reveal a weak and inconsistent relationship between politicians and the electorate. Respondents noted that politicians are more accessible during election periods but become distant after securing electoral victory. This pattern reinforces the perception that political engagement is motivated by electoral gain rather than genuine concern for citizens' welfare.

Role of Traditional Institutions

Traditional rulers are perceived as influential actors in local politics. Many respondents believe that traditional institutions play advisory roles or subtly influence voting behavior. However, some respondents noted attempts by certain traditional leaders to remain neutral. Overall, traditional authority continues to shape political outcomes at the local level.

Youth Participation in Politics

The interpretation shows that youth participation in politics is mixed. While there is growing involvement among youths, many remain politically apathetic. Some respondents highlighted that youths are often mobilized primarily as campaign tools rather than active decision-makers. This suggests limited empowerment of youths within the political structure.

Political Parties and Community Unity

Responses indicate that political parties often contribute to division rather than unity within communities. Party loyalty frequently overrides communal identity, leading to conflicts and strained relationships. However, political parties are also acknowledged for increasing political awareness among residents.

Trust in Elected Officials

Trust in elected officials is generally low among respondents. While some level of trust exists at the beginning of a political tenure, it often declines due to perceived poor performance and unfulfilled promises. This declining trust negatively affects citizens' willingness to participate in political processes.

Credibility of Elections

Respondents' views suggest that elections in Itesiwaju are relatively peaceful but flawed. Although violence is minimal, issues such as electoral manipulation, vote buying, and voter influence undermine the

credibility of the electoral process. This affects public confidence in democratic institutions.

Influence of Money in Politics

Money is widely perceived as a major determinant of political outcomes in Itesiwaju Local Government. Vote buying and financial inducements are commonly reported, though a minority of respondents maintain that some voters still exercise independent judgment. The dominance of money politics weakens democratic ideals.

Impact of Politics on Daily Life

Politics affects daily life in several ways, including access to amenities and social relationships. Some respondents reported increased tension during political periods, while others felt politics had minimal direct impact on their daily activities. This variation reflects differing levels of political engagement across communities.

Motivation for Political Participation

The interpretation shows that political participation is driven largely by personal benefits and party loyalty, rather than collective interest. Although some respondents participate out of a desire for community development, this motivation is less dominant, indicating a utilitarian perception of politics.

Effectiveness of Local Government Administration

Respondents generally perceive the local government administration as ineffective, though a few acknowledged competent performance by certain officials. Leadership quality was identified as a key factor influencing administrative effectiveness, highlighting the importance of accountable leadership.

Accountability in Politics

The findings reveal that political accountability is weak. Leaders tend to show accountability mainly during election periods,

with limited transparency afterward. This reinforces public distrust and negative perceptions of governance.

Women's Participation in Politics

Women's participation in politics is perceived as low and largely supportive. Most women are seen as mobilizers rather than contenders for political offices. Cultural, economic, and social barriers were implied as limiting women's political involvement.

Overall Perception of Politics in Itesiwaju Local Government

Overall, politics in Itesiwaju Local Government is perceived as self-serving, selective, and unreliable, yet still recognized as essential for development and governance. This dual perception reflects both dissatisfaction with political practices and hope for reform.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the perception of politics in Itesiwaju Local Government Area is largely negative and characterized by skepticism and distrust. Residents perceive politics as a self-serving activity dominated by political elites rather than a platform for inclusive development. The weak relationship between politicians and the people, particularly after elections, has contributed significantly to declining public confidence in political institutions.

Although some level of political awareness exists among residents, it has not translated into effective participation or accountability. The persistent issues of corruption, money politics, selective development, and poor fulfillment of political promises have further deepened citizens' disillusionment with politics. However, the recognition of politics as a necessary tool for development suggests that residents still

maintain hope for improvement if meaningful reforms are implemented.

The study therefore concludes that improving the perception of politics in Itesiwaju Local Government requires deliberate efforts to promote transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, and citizen engagement at the grassroots level.

Recommendations

In view of the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Promotion of Political Accountability

Political office holders should be encouraged to maintain transparency and accountability in governance. Mechanisms such as regular town hall meetings and public accountability forums should be institutionalized to enable citizens to monitor government activities.

Strengthening Political Education

Government agencies, civil society organizations, and educational institutions should intensify political education programs to enhance citizens' understanding of their political rights and responsibilities. This will reduce political apathy and manipulation.

Youth and Women Inclusion in Politics

Deliberate policies should be implemented to encourage greater participation of youths and women in politics. This can be achieved through leadership training, mentorship programs, and reduced financial barriers to political participation.

Reduction of Money Politics

Electoral bodies should strengthen enforcement of laws against vote buying and political corruption. Strict penalties should be imposed on offenders to discourage the influence of money in politics.

Improvement in Local Government Autonomy

The autonomy of local governments should be strengthened to enable effective decision-making and development planning at

the grassroots level. Reduced interference from state-level politics will enhance local governance performance.

Equitable Distribution of Development Projects

Development projects should be evenly distributed across communities based on need rather than political affiliation. This will improve public trust and foster inclusive development.

Improved Relationship Between Politicians and Citizens

Political leaders should maintain consistent engagement with the electorate beyond election periods. Continuous interaction will help build trust and ensure that governance reflects citizens' needs.

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