

PREBENDALISM AND NETIZENSHIP: CRITICAL NOTES ON GOOD GOVERNANCE AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Keywords:

Prebendalism;
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It is perhaps no overstatement to submit that current global discourse on prebendalism cannot but make reference to the Nigerian state as paradigmatic of everything prebendal: corruption, nepotism and dysfunctional governance, among others. The publication of *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* by Richard Joseph (1987) squarely positioned Nigeria a connotative and denotative reference in virtually any dialogue on prebendalism since the late 80s. In spite of its fertile ecosystem and virile human capital, Nigeria remains an underdeveloped nation with a dysfunctional governance space and an anomalous economy. In most democracies the media has proven to be indisputable galvanizers of good governance. The history of the media in Nigeria is fraught with stories of censorship, arrest of journalists and closure of media houses. There is however an emergent e-media culture in Nigeria – the social media. Characterized by a growing number of what is describable as netizens (or net citizens), the social media provides new platforms for engaging governance. The paper

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analytically examined the emergent interplay between social media and good governance, with particular reference to the desideratum to de-prebandalize the Nigerian State. Among others, the paper concluded by making policy recommendations for harnessing the transformational potentials of the social media for deepening the governance space in Nigeria for good governance.

1. Introduction

Global discussions and literature on prebendalism make reference to the Nigerian state as paradigmatic of everything prebendal: corruption, nepotism and dysfunctional governance, among others. The publication of the monumental piece *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* by Richard Joseph (1987) squarely positioned Nigeria a connotative and denotative reference in virtually any literary discourse on prebendalism since the late 80s.

In spite of its fertile ecosystem, Nigeria remains an underdeveloped nation. In spite of the abundance of internationally acclaimed professionals, scholars and experts of Nigerian extract, the governance space in Nigeria remains dysfunctional. With a large population of Nigerians - 'in the diaspora' - weathering all kinds of weather and contributing to the development of Asian and European economies among others, the Nigerian economy remains anomalous.

In most democracies, the fourth estate of the realm – the media – has proven to be indisputable galvanizers of good governance, responsive and responsible citizenship. The history of the media in Nigeria is however fraught with stories of censorship, arrest of journalists and closure of media houses. There is however an emergent and growing e-media culture in Nigeria – the social media. Characterized by a growing number of what is describable as netizens (or net citizens), the social or e-media provides new platforms for engaging governance. In this paper we analytically examined the phenomenon of the emergent interplay between social media and good

governance, with particular reference to the ever-present need to de-prebandalize the Nigerian State.

In logical pursuit of its aim the paper is made up of four sections. The first section describes the prebendal nature of the Nigerian state as antithetical to good governance. In the second section we examine the interplay between good governance and the social media as a background to the third section where we examine the plausibility of the thesis that social media may be a viable tool for engendering good governance. The fourth and concluding section recommends a policy roadmap for harnessing social media in the imperative task of de-prebandalizing the governance space in Nigeria.

Section I: Prebendalism and the Nigerian State

One phenomenon that remains unarguably definitive of the Nigerian state is the historical amalgamation of two former British colonies - the northern protectorate and the southern protectorate - in 1914. The Lugard-led 1914 cementation of southern and northern ethnicities birthed a new nation - Nigeria. This monumental creation, or amalgamation of Nigeria has been variously described a fundamental mistake (Sagay, 2015).

Existing literature on the Amalgamation of 1914 is suggestive of the resultant cementation as largely constitutive of the bane of the Nigerian state: continued ethnic contestation for power and massive abuse of power in the guise of ethnic nationalism. Lord Lugard, the acknowledged principal architect of the 1914 edifice of the new Nigeria, embarked on the project of marrying varying ethnicities largely for administrative convenience and not majorly for the developmental interest of the building ethnic blocs (Adekunle, 2015).

Nigeria, it would appear is an economico-administrative invention of the British colonialists geared towards reducing the cost of governing over two hundred and fifty ethnic identities with differing values; indigenous, imported, religious, economic and political. The resultant mega-nation of ethnic nations - Nigeria - is a complex political structure that continues to generate ethnic vexations and agitations for rearrangements in various forms; re-fixing, re-structuring, re-constituting and re-federalising, among others (Olaopa, 2017).

To the extreme, there exists ethnic vituperations in the direction of de-structuring *-a la* cessionist voices from oil-rich south-eastern Nigeria. Paradigmatic of agitations for addressing the structure of the Nigerian state is the call by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) for re-negotiating membership of the Nigerian State. Similar ethnocentric formations like the Arewa Consultative Forum in Northern Nigeria, and the Oodua People's Congress in South Western Nigeria, have at one time or the other issued ethnological communiques rationalizing the need to redress one form of marginalization or the other in the nation's expansive governance space (Suberu, 2013)

Inextricably intertwined with the ethnocentric agitations for either relevance in the scheme of things or break up of the Nigerian State, is the phenomenal *prebendality* of governance and statesmanship in Nigeria. An etymologico-lexical comprehension of the term prebend indicates that the term derives from a long age reward practice of the Catholic Church. According to catholic tradition, the canons or members of particular chapters of the Church are entitled to a portion of the revenues generated by that chapter of the church. This *prebendary* reward system derives from the original Latin *prebenda*, which ordinarily refers to 'pension'. The term *prebend* metamorphosed, however into a much more technical usage with the 1987 publication of the book *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*. With theoretico-pragmatic interest in developmental politics in Nigeria, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria* seeks to arrive at an understanding about the fundamental flaw in Nigerian politics, economy and society (Joseph, 1987).

Following historico-descriptive analysis of the Nigerian State, Richard Joseph deepened and deployed the term prebendalism to refer to the crucial problem with Nigeria, dysfunctional governance. While acknowledging Richard Joseph to be the first to use the term prebendalism to describe patron-client or neopatrimonialism in Nigeria, Wikipedia aptly captures the theoretical framework espoused by Richard Joseph as he "...used the term to describe the sense of entitlement that many people in Nigeria feel they have to the revenues of the Nigerian state. Elected officials, government workers, and members of the ethnic and religious groups to which they belong feel they have a right to a share of government revenues." Wikipedia further notes Joseph's submission that the theory of prebendalism refers to a phenomenon where "state offices

are regarded as prebends that can be appropriated by officeholders, who use them to generate material benefits for themselves and their constituents and kin groups..." (Wikipedia, 2017)

The metaphysical construct deducible from Joseph's analysis of the Nigerian State is that of a multi-ethnic configuration in which every ethnic constituent sees the governance space as a largesse - a free for all national cake (a material benefit) to which they have claims or entitlements. Derived from that dysfunctional metaphysics of the Nigerian state are ethno-epistemological postulations which attempt to provide ethno-centered justification for sectional entitlements to the *Nigerian largesse*. The political parlance in Nigeria, for example, continue to be characterized by ethnically-loaded constructs such as "...it is simply our share of the national cake"; "...one cannot beautify the waist of another, while that of one's brethren remains un-beautified", and "he is a son of the soil" among others.

The pervading metaphysical and epistemological realities of the governance space in Nigeria heuristically births a nation where the primacy of ethical imports of governmental actions or inactions is inconsequential. That which is good and morally acceptable, within the framework of the Nigerian ethno-ethnic system is that which brings home prebends for individuals or group of individuals from the concerned ethnic group. Thus, the good ethnic-nationalist is that individual who is able to sufficiently appropriate prebends (or share of the national cake) for himself, and by extension, for his client-ethnic group.

Resulting from the pervasiveness of ethno-morality in the Nigerian multi-ethnic federal structure is a presumed national value, "anything goes". This presumption of 'anything goes' value-system is often shrouded in distinctively Nigerian sayings such as "corruption is not stealing" and "stealing is not corruption". With particular reference to the principle of utilitarianism for example, the ethno-nationalist and his clients advocate a somewhat ethno-utilitarian principle according to which that which is good is that which brings to the ethnic group the highest number of prebends for the highest number of members of the ethnic group.

The detrimental consequence of Nigeria's historico-structural and multi-ethnic metaphysics is that it engenders corruption at all levels; personal, group, national and at sub-national. The issue

of corruption is at the hearth of prebendal politics in Nigeria. Nigeria is prebendal to the extent that virtually every officeholder at national or sub-national level seeks to, or is expected to, get a share of the national cake using "whatever" means: bribery, settlement, road blocking, election rigging, budget padding, kickback, file dodging, among others. The failure of an individual or a leader to show affluence or influence during or after holding a public office is often viewed by his political clients or "fellow countrymen" as catastrophic. Thus the urge by the average public officer to (mis)use office in the interest of his expectant clients or ethnic group.

The interplay of the mentalities of officeholder-client relationships deepens corruption in Nigeria. The result of the pervasive and prebendal officeholder-client mentalities in the political space in Nigeria is the nationwide entrenchment of a patron-client morality. The patron-client morality invariably creates a class – of a few privileged and opportuned rulers and followership – who must fence off from power those who "do not belong", for continued relevance and survival. The continued abysmal low ranking of Nigeria on the corruption and political transparency index is testimonial to a damaging patron-client morality (Transparency International, 2017).

Section III: Social Media, Netizenship and Good Governance

There exists an emergent trend in the media ecosystem - the social media. The social media is making global incursions in the governance space of nations, regional blocs and international institutions. Sometimes referred to as e-media, the social media refers to “web-based tools and services that allow users to create, share, rate and search for content and information without having to log in to any specific portal site or portal destination. These tools become ‘social’ in the sense that they are created in ways that enable users to share and communicate with one another” (Bohler-Muller & Van der Merwe, 2011: 3). As noted by Evie Browne, social media includes social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, video blogs, discussion forums and others" (Browne 2015).

Social media-based tools such as Facebook, Twitter and mobile phone technology are increasingly creating e-communities and e-societies that transcend geographical boundaries and de-territorializes nation-states. The increased worldwide use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the last two decades have deepened the digital space, thus creating an

emergent digitalized world. Social media and its paraphernalia of the Internet is promotive of the digitalization of human interactions across borders. The increased digitalization of the world – largely mediated by ICT-based social media – is closing space at all fronts and increasing real-time exchange of information between citizens, nations, persons of different nationalities, and between governments and the governed. Social media creates technosociality, a phenomenon that refers to the marriage or interplay of technology and social behavior. Technosociality is fast becoming a part of social reality (Artwick, 2011).

With particular reference to governance, the social media is increasingly expanding the governance space and engendering the participation of more citizens in governmental processes and businesses. Inclusive governance is fast becoming more compelling for governments across the world. The social media is aiding the raising of consciousness about governmental information regarding policy formulation, implementation, budgeting, legislation and, civic rights and responsibilities, among others. Citizens on social media platforms create discussions, fan pages, blogs and groups around issues of political interests. Information regarding government processes, actions and inactions are freely shared through social media with a speed that beats traditional media. The fast rate at which information flows through the social media about government programs and policies stimulate participatory governance. Responsive governments across the globe also imbibe the e-media culture of creating social media platforms for informing and enlightening citizens about government activities and policies (Bertot, 2010). The phenomenon social media is birthing a paradigm shift in citizenship. Citizens' participation in the political space is becoming increasingly digitalized. The social media provides fast-paced information on state budgets, taxes, constitution, policy papers, elections and party activities, among others. The internet-powered social media is thus midwifing a paradigm shift from citizenship to netizenship - a phenomenon in which citizens go on the net (or online) to exercise their civic rights. A netizen by extension refers to a citizen, in the information age, who takes issues relating to the exercise of civic rights and responsibilities to the net. Politically conscious citizens in the Information Age are increasingly becoming netizens as they find in the social media an unfettered and less regulated space for political activism.

Netizens have been found to engage governments online for social change and reconstruction. The twitter-backed Arab Spring-Revolution comes to mind. The Arab Spring has been variously described to have benefited from the online (or *net*) activities of a number of citizens who deployed the social media to share information and raise the political consciousness of an otherwise citizenry impoverished by information blackout and government propaganda (Bohler-Muller, 2011). The Arab Spring is paradigmatic of the power of netizens to make government work for the people.

With particular reference to Nigeria, where prebendal processes and practices characterize the political space, it becomes imperative to begin to see how the emergence of a sizeable number of netizens – as conceptualized – could bring about the much desired transparency and accountability in government. Mass mobilization and sensitization is *sine qua non* for any transformational or revolutionary process. Fighting corruption and addressing the question of the structure of the Nigerian State requires that people are sufficiently enlightened about the interplay between mis-governance, corruption and poverty. The social media ecosystem is a potential platform for mass mobilization for good governance in Nigeria.

Corollary to the mass-mobilization potentials of the social media is that it creates a network of online socially and politically active citizenry - netizens - who appetitively search for information about governance and aggressively shares same in real time graphics and images, among others. The ever-increasing number of social media subscribers in Nigeria are potential netizens for social change that would promote transparency and accountability in government.

Propaganda is one of the trademarks of bad leadership. From an historico-analytic perspective, bad leaderships deploy misleading, vague and ambiguous information in order to hold on to power. State-owned Guenterbeg press and electronic media are often deployed by corrupt leaders to fight, victimize and vilify frontline local crusaders of anti-corruption struggle. A territorially boundless phenomenon, the social media provides netizens a platform for fighting corruption in any part of the globe and from anywhere in the world. Social media makes it possible for an anti-corruption non-governmental organization based in the United Kingdom, for example, to counter and refute government propaganda in Nigeria.

Social media is a veritable tool for holding government accountable. Accountability – and its corollary, transparency – promote justice, equity and stability. The Nigerian nation is bedeviled with corrupt practices by state officials who prebendalize state resources in the absence of a widespread mechanism or platform for holding state officials accountable. With annual geometric increase in the number of Internet users in Nigeria (NCC, 2017), the social media provides a platform for tackling the damaging primal bane of the Nigerian State – prebendalism.

Section IV: Conclusion

Addressing the problem of the primal bane of the Nigerian society requires that there exists a virile media free from excessive governmental regulation. The envisioned correctional media for the Nigerian State must be able to gather, analytically present, and widely broadcast information about government activities and processes, in an objective and de-ethnicized manner. The social media – properly harnessed – provides a veritable platform for the much desired correctional media in Nigeria. The large number of Facebook users and tweeps in the social media space in Nigeria could, without the orgy of violence and bloodshed, birth the much needed process of de-prebendalizing the governance space in Nigeria while also birthing a correctional federal structure devoid of an all-powerful federal government who lords it over lilliputianized and ineffectual sub-national governments.

Governments at National and sub-national levels equally stand to benefit from using the social media platform as a tool for gathering and disseminating information. Disseminating governmental information about budgets, taxes and award of contracts dispels rumors and speculations while also enhancing the transparency and accountability profile of government.

The Nigerian government, as a matter of correctional policy, should evolve a social media monitoring and evaluation mechanism to gather information about trending concerns of citizens and respond to them within the ambit of the rule of law. Thus rather than attempt to gag social media in Nigeria, the government of Nigeria should indeed evolve a Social Media Policy to harness the informational, transformational and de-prebendalizing benefits of social media.

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