

ELITE RECRUITMENT AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA, 1999-2023

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Abstract

This study examines elite recruitment and its implications for political development in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023. It explores the patterns of elite recruitment, their impact on governance and political stability, and the challenges that undermine effective recruitment processes. Using a qualitative methodology, the study analyzes secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, and media articles. The findings reveal that patronage systems, monetized politics, and exclusionary practices have weakened governance and contributed to political instability. However, the study also identifies opportunities for reform through merit-based recruitment, institutional strengthening, and inclusive practices. These reforms are essential for fostering sustainable political development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Elite recruitment, Political development, Governance, Nigeria, Political stability

Introduction

Elite recruitment is a critical aspect of political development, as it involves the processes by which individuals ascend to positions of influence and authority within a political system. In Nigeria, since the return to democracy in 1999, elite recruitment has played a defining role in shaping the country's governance, political stability, and socio-economic progress. The recruitment processes, which include elections, appointments, and patronage, have often been characterized by nepotism, ethnocentrism, and political patronage. These practices have had profound implications for Nigeria's political trajectory. According to Ihechukwu Madubuike:

It is clear that not all Nigerians have equal access to the same opportunities in life and in practice. This is partly due to the limitations of birth, environment, education and other social circumstances. For instance, people with absorptive advantages find social ascendancy easier than those with none; appointments into top political positions, when they are not made on ethnic basis, follow the "old boy network" formula or the god father principle. This is how some group of people or a class comes to perpetuate its domination over others. This same phenomenon influences recruitment and participation into Nigeria's political economy.¹

Between 1999 and 2007, elite recruitment in Nigeria was shaped by the return to democratic governance, which brought new actors into political and administrative positions. The presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) exemplified this process, as he recruited elites from various sectors to build his administration. For example, technocrats like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a former World Bank managing director, were brought into government to spearhead economic reforms as Minister of Finance. Similarly, Nasir El-Rufai, an urban planning expert, was appointed Minister of the Federal Capital Territory, reflecting efforts to integrate skilled professionals into governance. Political elites, such as state governors like James Ibori of Delta State and Bola Ahmed Tinubu of Lagos State, also rose to prominence during this period, influencing both regional and national politics. The introduction of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) under Nuhu Ribadu demonstrated an

attempt to recruit reformist elites to tackle corruption. However, elite recruitment during this era was often criticized for being influenced by patronage networks and ethnic balancing rather than meritocracy, highlighting the challenges of fostering inclusive and effective governance in Nigeria.

Moreover, political parties in Nigeria have played a significant role in elite recruitment, albeit with varying degrees of effectiveness. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) dominated the early years of the Fourth Republic, relying on internal zoning arrangements to distribute power. Similarly, the rise of the All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2015 reshaped elite recruitment patterns, reflecting shifting alliances and power dynamics.² These developments underscore how elite recruitment reflects and reinforces broader political, social, and economic trends in Nigeria.

The challenges of elite recruitment in Nigeria are compounded by structural issues such as corruption, weak institutions, and the monetization of politics. The heavy financial costs of elections, for instance, have excluded many qualified candidates, leaving the field to the wealthy and politically connected. This dynamic perpetuates cycles of ineffective governance and limits opportunities for political development.

The concept of elite recruitment and its relevance to political development

Elite recruitment refers to the process by which individuals are selected, trained, and positioned to occupy influential roles in political, social, and economic systems. It involves mechanisms such as elections, appointments, inheritance, and patronage, which determine who gains access to power and decision-making. In democratic settings, elite recruitment is often achieved through competitive elections and institutionalized party systems, while in authoritarian regimes, it may rely on loyalty and personal connections. The quality of elite recruitment significantly affects political stability, governance efficiency, and the legitimacy of political systems.³

In Nigeria, elite recruitment has been a defining factor in its political development, especially since the transition to democracy in 1999. Political parties play a central role in recruiting elites, determining who contests elections or holds significant offices. For example, the zoning formula adopted by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) from 1999 to 2015 was a deliberate strategy to ensure regional balance in elite recruitment, reflecting Nigeria's multi-ethnic nature. While this approach promoted inclusion, it often sidelined merit, as candidates were selected based on regional or ethnic considerations rather than competence.⁴

Effective elite recruitment fosters political development by ensuring that leadership positions are occupied by capable individuals. When elites are chosen based on merit and competency, they are more likely to enact policies that promote economic growth, political stability, and social equity. For instance, the recruitment of technocrats such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala into key government roles demonstrated the potential for elite recruitment to drive economic reforms and enhance governance. However, the monetization of politics in Nigeria often undermines this potential, as candidates with financial resources rather than technical expertise dominate political recruitment processes.⁵

The relevance of elite recruitment extends to its impact on political stability and governance. Inclusive recruitment mechanisms can mitigate conflicts by ensuring that all groups are represented in leadership. In Nigeria, however, exclusionary practices have often fueled political tensions. For example, the marginalization of certain ethnic groups in elite recruitment processes has contributed to agitations for regional autonomy and the rise of separatist movements, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).⁶ This demonstrates the need for equitable and transparent recruitment processes to foster unity and national integration.

Theoretical framework: Elite theory

Elite theory serves as an appropriate framework for understanding elite recruitment and its impact on political development in Nigeria. Originating from the works of scholars like Gaetano Mosca and C. Wright Mills, elite theory posits that a small, privileged group wields disproportionate power over society's political, economic, and social structures. This theory argues that elites, by virtue of their

control over resources and institutions, shape the governance and development trajectory of any political system.⁷ In Nigeria, elite theory provides a lens to analyze how individuals ascend to elite status and the implications of their recruitment processes for governance, policymaking, and democratic consolidation.

The theory highlights the criteria and mechanisms that determine elite recruitment, including education, wealth, ethnicity, political connections, and institutional affiliations. In the Nigerian context, factors such as ethnic balancing, party politics, and patronage systems play critical roles in determining who gets recruited into the elite class. Elite theory is particularly useful in examining whether the recruitment processes have fostered inclusivity, meritocracy, or the perpetuation of exclusivity and inequality. This framework allows for the evaluation of how these processes have influenced political stability, governance quality, and the extent of democratic deepening in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.⁸

Applying elite theory to this study helps uncover the interplay between elite behavior and political outcomes in Nigeria. For instance, it facilitates an analysis of the extent to which elite circulation—replacement of old elites by new ones—has introduced innovative governance practices or merely maintained existing power structures.

Patterns of elite recruitment in Nigeria: 1999–2023

The patterns of elite recruitment in Nigeria since the return to democracy in 1999 have been shaped by the country's political history, socio-economic structures, and institutional frameworks. Political parties have been the primary channels for elite recruitment, with a significant emphasis on zoning, patronage, and financial capacity. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) institutionalized a zoning formula aimed at balancing political power among Nigeria's diverse ethnic regions. This approach influenced the emergence of leaders such as Olusegun Obasanjo (Southwest), Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (Northwest), and Goodluck Jonathan (South-South), demonstrating a deliberate attempt to ensure regional inclusivity.⁹

In addition to zoning, financial capability has played a critical role in elite recruitment, often overshadowing merit and competence. The monetization of politics, where candidates with substantial financial resources dominate, has limited access for individuals without significant wealth or political connections. For instance, the cost of securing party nomination forms and running campaigns in recent elections has excluded many qualified candidates. This trend was evident during the 2023 general elections, where wealthy candidates like Bola Ahmed Tinubu emerged as frontrunners, showcasing the dominance of money in Nigeria's political recruitment processes.¹⁰

Another notable pattern is the significant role of godfatherism, where influential political figures determine who gets recruited into key positions. This system of patronage allows political elites to exert control over emerging leaders, ensuring loyalty and perpetuating their influence. For example, former governors such as Tinubu in Lagos and Peter Odili in Rivers were instrumental in shaping the political trajectories of their protégés, reinforcing the personalization of political recruitment.¹¹

Youth and women remain underrepresented in Nigeria's elite recruitment processes, despite the introduction of measures like the "Not Too Young To Run" Act in 2018. While the Act reduced the age limits for political candidates, it did not address structural barriers such as financial constraints and entrenched political hierarchies. Similarly, cultural and systemic biases continue to limit women's participation in elite recruitment. For instance, the percentage of women in legislative and executive positions remains below global and regional averages, reflecting a persistent gender gap in political leadership.¹²

As Professor Gregory Nwizu asserts in a tablet format "Elite Recruitment in Nigeria (1999–2023) Influenced by Ethnicity, Godfatherism, and Class Perpetuation" 13

Category	Example	Ethnic Influence	Godfatherism/Patronage Influence	Elite Perpetuation
Presidency	Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007)	Chosen to represent the South-West, balancing ethnic tensions after Northern dominance.	Backed by military and political elites (e.g., Ibrahim Babangida).	Maintained ties with military-class elites who played key roles during military regimes.
	Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010)	Represented Northern interests in the power rotation arrangement.	Handpicked by Obasanjo to secure a successor favorable to his legacy.	His brother, Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, was a prominent elite figure, reinforcing family dominance.
	Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023)	Championed Northern interests and secured votes based on regional and religious alignment.	Supported by Northern elites and Bola Tinubu, a prominent South-West godfather.	Beneficiary of decades-long prominence as a military general and former Head of State.
Governors hip	Bukola Saraki (Kwara State, 2003–2011)	Leveraged ethnic majority dominance in Kwara.	Backed by his father, Olusola Saraki, a powerful political godfather in the state.	Continued family control of Kwara politics; transitioned into Senate presidency.
	Babajide Sanwo-Olu (Lagos State, 2019–2023)	Represented ethnic Yoruba dominance in Lagos State politics.	Elevated by Bola Tinubu, the undisputed godfather of Lagos politics.	Lagos governance perpetuates the Tinubu political dynasty.
Legislature	Ahmad Lawan (Senate President, 2019–2023)	Reflects Northern dominance in legislative leadership for political balance.	Backed by ruling party elites to consolidate power in the legislature.	Continues tradition of powerful elite families influencing parliamentary leadership.
Ministerial Appointments	Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Finance, 2003–2006)	Represented South-East/South-South interests in national appointments.	Invited by Obasanjo for economic reforms; gained international elite support.	Maintains elite status due to global connections and influence.
	Zainab Ahmed (Finance, 2018–2023)	Represents Northern inclusion in federal economic policy.	Backed by Northern elites to retain regional control of strategic ministries.	Prominent family background linked to Kaduna elite circles.
Children of Elites	Bello Mohammed (FCT Minister, 2015–2023)	Represented Northern interests in strategic urban policy.	Son of Mohammed Musa Bello, a prominent Northern businessman and politician.	Continues family dominance in Northern elite networks.
	Mustapha Sule Lamido (Gubernatorial Aspirant, 2023)	Built on ethnic base in Jigawa State.	Son of Sule Lamido, a former governor and PDP chieftain.	Family influence positions children of elites for leadership roles.
Judiciary	Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad (Chief Justice, 2019–2022)	Represents Northern control in judiciary leadership.	Supported by Northern political and judicial elites.	Maintains judicial dominance by elites with ties to ruling class.

This table highlights how ethnicity, godfatherism, and class perpetuation have shaped elite recruitment in Nigeria, sustaining a cycle of power within a privileged few while limiting broader societal inclusion.

Impact of elite recruitment on political stability and governance

Elite recruitment plays a crucial role in shaping political stability and governance by determining the quality and diversity of leadership in a political system. In Nigeria, the mechanisms and patterns of elite recruitment have had significant implications for the country's political landscape since the return to democracy in 1999. When recruitment processes prioritize inclusivity, competence, and accountability, they enhance governance and foster stability. Conversely, recruitment processes characterized by nepotism, patronage, and financial dominance often lead to poor governance and political unrest. For instance, the adoption of the zoning formula by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) initially promoted regional balance and inclusivity, contributing to political stability during the early years of the Fourth Republic.¹⁴

However, the monetization of politics and the dominance of godfatherism have undermined governance by prioritizing loyalty and financial strength over merit and capacity. Leaders recruited through such mechanisms often lack the necessary skills and commitment to address Nigeria's pressing socio-economic challenges. For example, many state governors have been accused of prioritizing the interests of their political benefactors over the welfare of their constituents. This has resulted in widespread corruption, weak institutions, and ineffective governance, fueling discontent and political instability.¹⁵

Exclusionary elite recruitment practices have also exacerbated political instability by marginalizing certain groups. The underrepresentation of women, youth, and ethnic minorities in political leadership has created a sense of alienation among these groups. This exclusion has contributed to agitations for greater representation, such as the rise of separatist movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast. Addressing such grievances requires more inclusive recruitment processes that reflect Nigeria's diversity and ensure equitable representation.¹⁶

Despite these challenges, elite recruitment has also provided opportunities for reforms and progress in governance. The recruitment of technocrats like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Akinwumi Adesina into key government positions showcased the potential for transformative leadership when merit and expertise are prioritized. Their contributions to economic reforms and agricultural development, respectively, highlight how strategic recruitment can positively impact governance and policy implementation.¹⁷

Challenges to effective elite recruitment in Nigeria

Effective elite recruitment in Nigeria faces numerous challenges rooted in socio-political, economic, and cultural dynamics. One major issue is the entrenched system of patronage and godfatherism, where political elites dictate who gets recruited into leadership positions. This system undermines meritocracy, as loyalty to influential figures often supersedes competence and capacity. For example, the rise of several governors and lawmakers, especially in states like Lagos and Rivers, has been attributed to the influence of political godfathers rather than individual merit. This practice perpetuates a cycle of mediocrity in leadership and weakens governance.¹⁸

Another significant challenge is the monetization of the political process, where financial capacity becomes a key determinant of access to leadership positions. High nomination fees, campaign costs, and vote-buying practices limit opportunities for capable individuals without substantial financial resources. For instance, the exorbitant costs of nomination forms during the 2023 general elections disenfranchised many potential candidates, narrowing the pool of recruits to wealthy individuals and further entrenching elite domination.¹⁹

Ethnic and regional biases also pose challenges to effective elite recruitment in Nigeria. The country's diverse ethnic composition and history of regional tensions have led to a reliance on zoning arrangements to distribute power among geopolitical zones. While this approach aims to foster inclusivity, it sometimes prioritizes regional representation over competence. For example, the zoning formula used by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in selecting presidential candidates has occasionally resulted in the selection of leaders with limited capacity to address Nigeria's complex challenges.²⁰

The exclusion of women and youth from elite recruitment processes remains another critical barrier. Despite the passage of the “Not Too Young to Run” Act in 2018, structural and cultural barriers continue to limit youth participation in politics. Similarly, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions, with only a handful of female governors and senators since 1999. This lack of diversity in elite recruitment hinders the inclusion of fresh perspectives and innovative ideas in governance, perpetuating a cycle of traditional and often ineffective leadership styles.²¹

Lastly, weak institutional frameworks and the absence of internal democracy within political parties have undermined effective elite recruitment. Political parties often lack transparent and competitive processes for selecting candidates, leading to imposition and favoritism. For instance, during the 2023 primaries, allegations of irregularities and manipulation were rampant across major parties, further eroding public trust in the political recruitment process. Strengthening party structures and promoting internal democracy are critical steps toward improving elite recruitment in Nigeria.²²

Conclusion

This study set out to examine elite recruitment and its impact on political development in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023, with the objectives of identifying recruitment patterns, assessing their influence on governance, and evaluating the challenges to effective recruitment. The findings revealed that while elite recruitment plays a pivotal role in shaping political stability and governance, the process in Nigeria has been undermined by patronage, monetization of politics, and exclusionary practices. These factors have contributed to governance inefficiencies, political instability, and limited inclusivity in leadership.

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for reform. Merit-based recruitment, institutional strengthening, and fostering inclusivity can enhance governance and stability. The study highlighted examples where capable individuals, recruited based on expertise, positively influenced policy and governance. Addressing the systemic issues in recruitment practices will be essential for Nigeria to achieve sustainable political development and effective governance.

Endnotes

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