



## THE IMPLICATIONS OF POLITICAL TENURE INSTABILITY OF ELECTED LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ON GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *Political tenure instability in the Local Government Areas of the elected chairmen and counsellors have been a common phenomenon in Nigeria. This general phenomenon has its beginning from the military era (1966–1998) and has not changed much even with the return of the country to democratic governance in 1999. Nigeria has 36 states and 774 local government areas. Nearly 90% of these local government areas are without chairmen and counsellors. In their place, state governors set up caretaker committees that are now saddled with local governance. This paper provided insights on the causes and effects of this trend on the local government system in particular and grassroots development in general with special reference to the southeastern region of Nigeria. It was concluded that if this practice is not stemmed, particularly as the country's democracy flourishes, sustainable development goals at the local levels will not be achieved. The paper recommended measures that could be used to put a permanent end to this political quagmire.*

**KEYWORDS:** Caretaker Committees, Elected Officials, Local Government Areas, Political, Tenure Instability.



## INTRODUCTION

Stability of tenure of elected officers is an essential feature of a democratic government. Constitutional governments all over the world provide for a fixed term of office for elected officials to ensure political stability, consistency and continuity. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria expressly provided for a fixed term of office for elected local government officials, as contained in Section 7 (1) which stipulates in part that the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils under this constitution is guaranteed. This provision has roots in the 1976 local government reforms which conceived local government as government at the local level exercised through representative councils, established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas (Dawson, 2007; Dhikru, Adeoye & Akinola, 2019).

A reflection on the Third Tier of Government in Nigeria however reveals a chequered history of political leadership tainted with instability. The political executive at this tier has witnessed tenure instability beginning from the era of military incursion in the 1970s into the nation's polity up to the present democratic dispensation. While the upper tiers have enjoyed relative stability of tenure, the local governments' political leadership across the states of the federation is replete with scores of tenure instability that have almost undermined their existence. Since 1999, for example, there are no democratically elected officials in at least twenty-five states of the federation. It should be noted that there are 774 local governments in Nigeria. The use of caretaker committees at this level of governance has become commonplace than ever before. This new phenomenon in our local governments is gradually becoming the accepted norm at the expense of democratically elected councils (Lynn, 2012; Alapike, 2014). The aim of this study is therefore to obtain information about tenure instability of elected government officials at local government level and the implications on the development of the Southeastern region of Nigeria.

## METHODOLOGY

### Literature Search

This article is based on literature review of diverse publications on local government system in Nigeria within a period of twenty-one years, (1999–2020) since the commencement of the present democratic dispensation. The search for related articles yielded 153 results. This search was based on some checklists of markers such as “local government”, “local politics and policies”, “local democracy”, “local elections”, “local government financing”, “local government administration”, “local government economy”, “local development”, “local governance” and other terms commonly used in the literature of local government governance in Nigeria.

These articles were properly screened by going through their contents, and discarding those that were obviously not relevant to our topical issue. The screening process narrowed our review to 35 articles. The study later summarized the findings most of issues in a format that can be used and understood by policymakers, local, government developers and other interested parties.



## DATA COLLECTION

Each of these 35 articles contained some data and relevant information useful for the paper. All the indicators defined for measuring the implications of political tenure instability at local government level in Nigeria were noted, including causes of political instability (lack of political will, constitutional defects, political interest, weak houses of assembly, structural imbalance of local governments) and implications of instability (accountability, cost of governance, service delivery, political development, leadership qualities, political continuity, and level of poverty). After recording all these indicators, they were summarized and properly categorized and the number of unique indicators calculated using Shanon-Wiener (S-W) diversity index as a measure of uncertainty in presenting what would be selected if randomly drawn from the full list of indicators used. The indicators used were summarized and multi-criteria analysis carried out.

## RESULTS

The following results show the causes and implication of political tenure instability of local government officials at grassroots level in the Southeastern Nigeria:

### (a) Causes of Tenure Instability

- (i) **Constitutional Defects:** The most common journals that published articles containing constitutional defects were unanimous in their consensus that this factor is the basic problem of tenure instability (n=27). The constitutions so far operated in the country have not given adequate powers to the local government councils as a tier of government. For instance, the 1999 Constitution guaranteed a democratically elected local government system without a fixed term of office. This constitution equally failed to address the issue of tenure of elected council officials. This was further aggravated by the Supreme Court judgement of 2002 which declared the local government as an appendage of the state government and not really an autonomous tier. The judgment reads in part that:

*The federal partners in the Nigerian federation are the State and the Federal Governments. The Local government (that verdict held) were administrative conveniences, though listed in the 1999 Constitution, which really should be the business of the states. State governments have therefore exploited this loophole and are causing serious damage to the local government system (Waziri, 2008). This judgment shows that despite the constitutional recognition of the local governments as the third tier of government, they still remain as administrative conveniences of state government.*

- (ii) **Political Interest:** A retinue of articles (n=23) agreed that political interest is a major cause of political instability at grassroots level. Political interest, master-minded by greed and selfishness of political gladiators in the various states, play a significant role in determining whether or not local councils should be managed by democratically elected leaders. In most cases, the state governors handpick and choose their political allies and cronies to fill the position of chairmen of local councils. In fact, they prefer the use of “caretaker committees” whose members are susceptible to manipulations, especially in the area of budget approvals and formulation of policies and by-laws. Many writers



observed these events in all the local governments areas (Okunrinboye, 2017; Aidan, 2020).

- (iii) **Lack of Political Will:** A large gamut of the reviewed journals indicated lack of political will as a major factor (n=19). The main cause of unstable tenure of political executives at the local government level is lack of commitment to good governance and service to the people. The political class in Nigeria in general and the South East region in particular sees state power as an end in itself; access to it is a great opportunity to amass wealth. To do this, caretaker committees have to be used through whom they comfortably siphon local government funds without resistance (Adegbite, 2019; Gordon, 2020). Internal disputes among political parties on how to share their booties led to court cases and tenure instability of elected officials at this level.
- (iv) **Weak State Houses of Assembly:** Some of these publications blamed weak state houses of assembly (n=16) as a major cause of tenure instability. The under-mentioned judgement of the Supreme Court clearly recognized the state houses of assembly as the only body having the power to validly make laws prescribing the tenure of office of elected local government officers. The judgement stated unequivocally that:

*“It is the house of assembly of a state, and not the National Assembly, which has the power to make laws with respect to matters relating to or connected with elections to the office of chairman or vice chairman of local government council in a state or to the office of councilors therein” (Ijediogor & Ezea, 2012).*

The expectation of stakeholders is that the state assemblies use this power to enact laws that would guarantee the security of tenure of elected local councils, but this is not to be, owing to probably the fact that the state assemblies are under the control and tutelage of the state governors, who induce them with cash and make them succumb to executive lawlessness by approving the use of caretaker committees or enacting emergency legislations that contain ridiculous terms of office for local councils (Akubor, 2018).

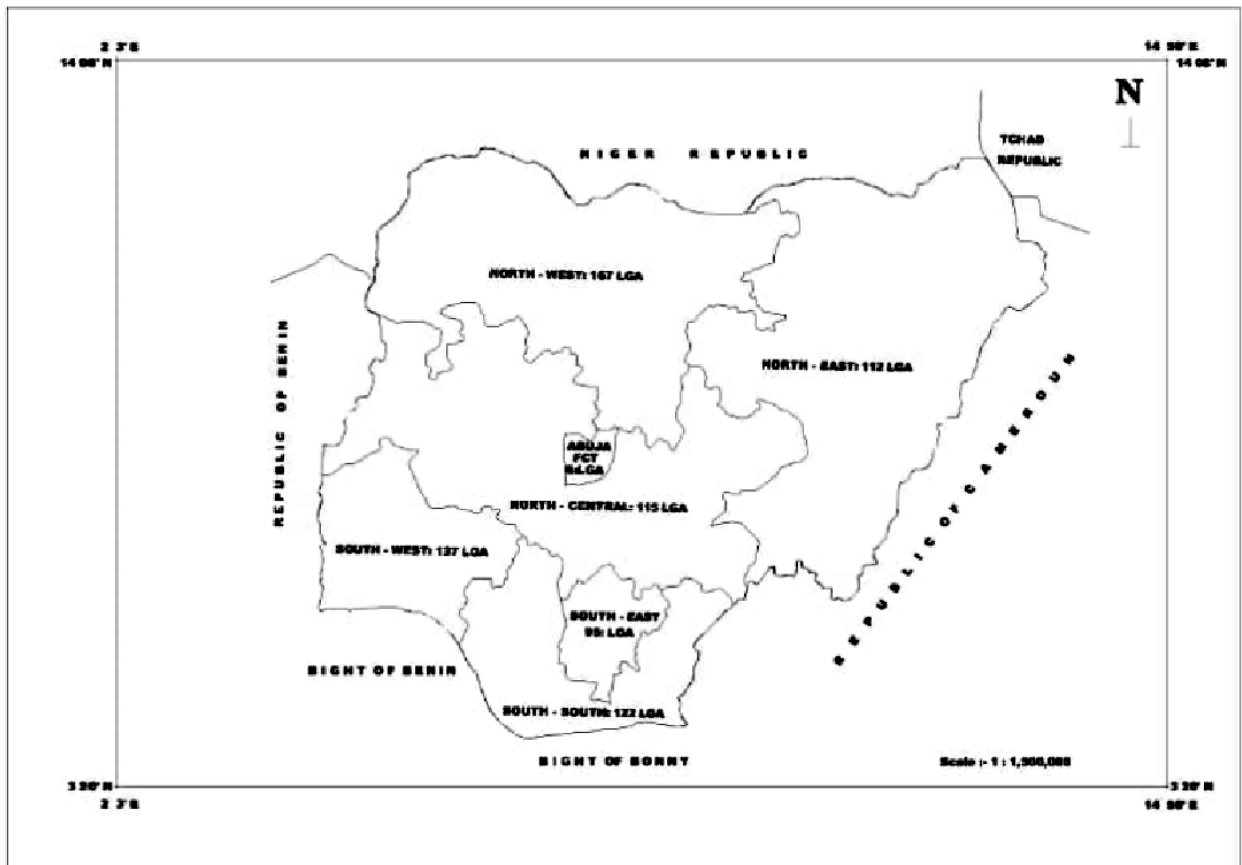
- (v) **Structural Imbalance of Local Government Administration:** There are seven hundred and seventy-four local government areas (774 LGAs) in Nigeria and these LGAs are not evenly distributed. While the Northern Region of Nigeria has more of the local government areas, with 414 LGAs, the Southern part has less with 356 LGAs. This lopsided positioning of the LGAs have raised dust as the South is thickly populated unlike the North where many of the LGAs are sparsely populated. The North uses the large number of LGAs to amass huge revenue allocation even when the major sources of the revenue are from the South-East and South South Zones.

Nigeria is a Federal Republic divided into thirty-six states and the Federal Capital; each state is in turn divided into local government areas (LGAs). Each local government is then further divided into wards.

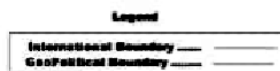
The configuration of local government areas in Nigeria based on the geographical zone reflects something like this:

**Table 1: Geographical Zones in Nigeria**

	<b>Geographical zone</b>	<b>No. of LGAs</b>
1	North West	186
2	North Central	114
3	North East	114
4	South East	95
5	South West	137
6	South South	124
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>774</b>



Source => Dept. Of Geography & Env. Mgt.  
Imo State University, Owerri, 85083219221.



**Map of Nigeria Showing the Zones**



An interesting extract from this figure is the low number of local government areas in the South East of Nigeria because of the less number of states in the zone. This is the only zone in Nigeria with five (5) states while others have six (6) excluding the Northwest with seven (7) states. The issue of LGAs in Nigeria is strategic in all her affairs, be it revenue sharing, population, election, etc. The Southeastern part of Nigeria has been henpecked by all standards especially since the present regime of Buhari took over in 2015. The number of LGAs in this zone explains the low size of federal allocations to the zone, which invariably affect the level of investments at local level in the area.

### (c) **Implications of Political Tenure**

The reviewed articles focused predominantly on accountability (85%), personnel cost (83%), service delivery (80%), political development (78%), leadership (76%), continuity (75%) and poverty (73%). The summary of findings in these articles are as follows:

- i. **Poor Accountability:** One major consequence of instability of tenure of elected local government officials is that accountability and transparency, two key factors that underpin democracy and good governance, are grossly undermined, thereby denying the public its right to democratic supremacy. Public accountability underscores the superiority of the public will over private interests for those engaged in the provision and delivery of services to the general public (Ujjwal & Roche, 2020).

Caretaker committees are not popularly elected by the people and therefore not accountable to the people, but to the governors who appointed them. Such a system depicts rule by right in which the mass of the people are totally alienated and neglected, characteristic of the past military regime. The result is inefficiency in the use of public resources, loss of quality control in the delivery of public service, corruption and the likes. Things began to happen covertly or in the dark at the local governments thereby raising dust on accountability and transparency. The implications are that the enjoyment of democratic life is hindered and grassroot development is greatly impeded (Akubor, 2014).

- ii. **High Personnel Cost:** Generally, personnel costs are incurred when political appointees exit the administration and new ones are hired. This is the same experience in the local government system. Huge sums of money are spent as a result of high leadership turnover at the local governments. Once a new caretaker leadership comes on board, takeoff grants or allowances are paid in addition to renovation of residences of the local government. This is what Fayol (1841–1925) pointed out when he said that recruitment and selection costs are usually associated with hiring new workers so management should, as much as possible, guard against instability of tenure and high labour turnover (Tonwe & Denga, 2003; Dellapiare, 2020).

- iii. **Poor Service Delivery:** The dearth of basic infrastructure in our rural areas could be attributed largely to unstable political leadership at the local level. Since majority of the states have been using caretaker committees over the years at the expense of democratically elected councils, public advice and deliveries suffer and are at their lowest ebb. The caretaker committees are required to do the biddings of the master (usually the rent-seeking elite). So once they are in office, they appropriate the federal allocations (as gratification) to the various competing selfish interests to the extent that, in some local councils, even the payment of staff salaries becomes a herculean task. Apart from this,



most of the caretaker committees have a short period to stay in office—some six months, others even less. With this short and uncertain duration therefore, there is no room for planning in terms of annual budgeting which articulates projects for the provision of basic services or infrastructure (Enyi, 1985; Darn, Ikejiani-Clerk & Mbat, 2001).

- iv. Weak Political Development:** The non-conduct of local government elections creates political disempowerment of the rural people. The people are politically disabled due to lack of opportunity to participate in their own affairs. The political parties become weak thereby weakening the entire democratic governance at the grassroots, leading to a total collapse of the critical issue of sustainable political development. Consequently, the desire to have local citizens in the management of local affairs, which is the major aim of establishing the local government, is defeated (Waziri, 2008; Stocker, 2019).
- v. Poor Leadership:** The utter neglect of democratically elected local councils by state governments gives rise to poor leadership, what may be termed "cut-and-nail leadership". This is because "there are no fixed criteria or standard rules and principles for appointing the so-called caretaker committees. The appointment or selection into caretaker committees are more of compensations for loyalty to the governor and some other powerful politicians, who the appointees sometimes owe their continuous stay in power. The caretaker leaders are mandated in the councils as masters in themselves, servants only to the governor and the political heavyweights of the local governments, thus limiting governance to themselves, the state governor and the godfathers (Ademolekun, 2002; Jarle, 2020).
- vi. Lack of Continuity:** In management literature, an organization that is infested with high labour turnover is bound to record low productivity because of lack of continuity which affects competence, experience and effectiveness. Many political appointees enter positions in government lacking the experience and expertise for effective leadership (National Commission on Public Service, 2003). Each of the new appointees comes with their policies and programs. With their short duration in office, they could only achieve little in terms of infrastructure and other projects. Perhaps, lack of continuity is more manifest in the number of abandoned projects across the local governments in the South East region (Adegbite, 2019).
- vii. Poverty:** The widespread and debilitating poverty in Southeastern Nigeria, particularly in the rural areas, is exacerbated by political leadership tenure instability in the local government councils. The caretaker leadership that emerges is parochially induced and self-serving, such that it does not embark on people-oriented projects that will empower the people and mitigate the poverty situation at the grassroots (Akubor, 2014; Adegbite, 2019). A recent report of the World Bank in December 2020 stated that Nigeria will record more 20 million poor in the next two years, most of them to be found in rural areas. This report suggests that little or nothing is done in terms of development largely resulting from political instability at local level.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The decisions of the representatives regarding the needs and priorities of the local community are apt to be accurate, and at any rate, legitimate because they are of the community rather than if they were made by agents of the central government. Democratic local government is, therefore, a sine qua non in Nigeria's quest for national transformation, and the sooner it is realized and guaranteed, the more secure the democracy and the future of Nigerians at the grassroots. To actualize this, the paper proffers the following measures to the problems of political tenure instability in our local governments, especially in the South East geopolitical zone of the country.

- i. The forthcoming constitution review should take as one of its priorities the provision for a defined term of office for elected local government officials, in order to bring to an end the use of caretaker committees. The provision for a three year tenure for elected local council leaders should guarantee political stability in the system during that period. If the duration of tenure is enshrined in the constitution, it will go a long way to checkmate the incessant use of caretaker committees to pilot the affairs of local governments, especially in the South East region.
- ii. Federal Government should release funds only to states operating democratically-elected local governments as required by the Constitution. States using caretaker committees in their local government system should have their statutory allocation withheld until they comply with the constitutional provision by putting in place democratic leadership in their local government areas. Funds allocated to local governments, especially in the South East region, should be sent to them to fully carry out their constitutional responsibilities.
- iii. Concerned citizens of the South East states should seek redress in the law courts. The courts may come up with rulings that could stem the tide. For instance, the one in Kogi State on 20th December, 2011 where the Chief Judge of the state declared that “any structure formed for the governance of a council outside a democratically elected council, in whatever form or name is illegal, null and void and therefore unconstitutional” (Agbana, 2012). States in the South East region of the country should emulate this.

## CONCLUSION

The study has tried to expose the cause of tenure instability of elected local government officials (constitutional defects, lack of political will, weak houses of assembly, etc) and its consequences on grassroot development (poor accountability, high personnel cost, poor service delivery, etc) especially in the South East region of Nigeria. From the results obtained, it is evidently clear that the constitutional powers granted to state governments are actually causing serious political, economic and social distortions on the local government system, as they prefer to use caretaker committees rather than democratically elected officials in local governance. This makes a mockery of democracy and goes to show the prevalence of the “military mentality” which continues to be felt at the local level. The much trumpeted “co-operative model” of development between these two tiers of government (states and local governments) actually favours the states with their top-down approach to local development. This approach therefore threatens long-term sustainability of local government system, and ultimately negates





the successful achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1, 3, 6 and 11 in the region. It then requires active involvement and participation of the people in the election of their representatives for a fixed tenure in order to achieve the goals and aspirations of local governments in the region.

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