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Prebendalism and the Politics of Patronage in Nigeria: An Elucidation of Public Service Delivery

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Abstract

This study interrogated the concept of prebendalism and its pervasive effects on governance and public service delivery in Nigeria. Conceptualised by Joseph (1987), prebendalism refers to the appropriation of state offices and resources by public officials as personal or sectional perquisites. The study examined the characteristics and manifestations of prebendalism within Nigeria's political and administrative systems, with particular focus on patronage networks, ethnic favoritism, clientelism, and the "national cake" mentality. Using a qualitative and theoretical approach anchored in neo-patrimonial theory, the study assessed how prebendal practices undermined bureaucratic rationality, institutional performance, and accountability. Findings reveal that prebendal politics contributes to systemic corruption, inefficiency, the politicization of appointments, resource misallocation, and a decline in citizens' trust in government institutions. The persistence of prebendalism is attributed to weak institutional frameworks, socio-economic inequality, politicized civil service, and entrenched communal and ethnic loyalties. The consequences are evident in poor infrastructure, inadequate social services, and the erosion of professional and ethical standards in public administration. The study recommends the institutionalization of merit-based recruitment, the strengthening of anti-corruption agencies, the adoption of e-governance and fiscal transparency, and a civic reorientation towards performance-based governance to eliminate prebendal politics from Nigeria's public service.

Keywords: Prebendalism, Public Service, Governance, Corruption, Service Delivery, Nigeria

Introduction

Prebendalism occupies a central place in the analysis of governance, state administration, and public service delivery in Nigeria. The concept was first systematically articulated by Joseph (1987) to explain the logic of political power and resource allocation in post-colonial African states. Joseph (1987) defined prebendalism as a system in which political office-holders appropriate state offices and resources, treating them as personal perquisites or "prebends." Within this framework, public authority is not exercised primarily for the collective good but is instead instrumentalized to generate and distribute material benefits to personal networks, political loyalists, and communal constituencies. In the Nigerian context, prebendalism manifests in the conversion of public institutions into arenas for patronage. Holders of political office routinely deploy state resources — including budgetary allocations, political appointments, licenses, contracts, and other discretionary privileges — as instruments of political exchange (Akinola, 2018). This pattern entrenches what has become popularly described as a "national cake" mentality, in which various ethnic, regional, and partisan groups compete to secure access to state resources (Okoli, 2019; Weber, 2023). The state is therefore not perceived as a neutral arbiter of the public interest but as a site of contestation where different groups seek to maximize their share of distributable goods.

Beyond elite politics, prebendalism also generates significant social and communal pressures. At the grassroots level, public office is often seen as a collective opportunity for a particular kinship group, community, or ethnic bloc to

“have its turn” in accessing state resources (Yin, 2018). In this sense, the political officeholder becomes an embodiment of group aspiration. Consequently, relatives and constituents expect the officeholder to channel state benefits back to the community. Failure to do so is often framed in moral terms, with the official labeled ungrateful, selfish, or as a betrayal of communal trust (Joseph, 1987). As Akinola (2018) notes, these dynamics collapse the boundary between public duty and private obligation, thereby weakening bureaucratic rationality and institutional accountability. The persistence of prebendal practices has profound implications for governance and service delivery in Nigeria. First, it incentivizes the politicization of appointments and resource allocation, thereby subordinating competence and merit to loyalty and identity. Second, it fuels cycles of competition and conflict among groups seeking inclusion in the distribution network. Third, it undermines public trust in institutions because citizens come to view government primarily as a mechanism for extraction rather than for development (Okoli, 2019). Thus, understanding prebendalism is essential for interrogating the structural challenges of governance in Nigeria. It provides analytical leverage for explaining why formal rules of public administration are often circumvented, why service delivery remains poor despite budgetary provisions, and why political office continues to be perceived largely as a means of private accumulation (Ostrom, 1996). In sum, prebendalism captures both the elite logic of resource capture and the societal logic of distributive expectations that together shape the Nigerian state (Joseph, 1987; Akinola, 2018; Okoli, 2019).

Public service delivery in Nigeria is plagued by persistent inefficiency, leading to poor outcomes for citizens. A critical factor exacerbating this issue is the prevalence of prebendal politics, in which public offices and resources are treated as tools of personal patronage. This correlation between prebendalism and administrative failure leads to deteriorating service quality: essential services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and water and electricity suffer from poor delivery, thereby impacting citizen welfare. Secondly, Corruption and resource misallocation: prebendal politics fuel corruption; funds meant for public services are diverted for personal gain and patronage networks. Also, prebendal practices lead to bureaucratic bottlenecks and inefficiency, such as appointments based on loyalty or ethnicity rather than merit, which hamper institutional effectiveness, resulting in citizens losing trust in government due to unresponsive services and perceived corruption, thereby affecting governance legitimacy (Okoli, 2019). Finally, poor service delivery hampers national development, undermining economic growth, poverty reduction, and human capital development.

The Public Service refers to all the departments, ministries, and agencies that help the government plan and implement its policies and programs.

It includes all employees who work for the Federal, State, and Local Governments, excluding political office holders. In simple terms, the Public Service helps the government to run the country effectively. Nigeria’s Public Service is organized into three main levels of government:

a. The Federal Level

At the federal level, the public service consists of:

The Presidency includes the President, Vice President, and special advisers.

Federal Ministries, each headed by a Minister (a political appointee) and a Permanent Secretary (a senior career civil servant). Examples: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, etc.

Extra-Ministerial Departments and Agencies, like the Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC), Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), and National Universities Commission (NUC).

Parastatals, organizations owned and controlled by the government but operate semi-independently.

Examples: Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA), Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA).

b. The State Level

At the state level, the public service includes:

The Governor’s Office

State Ministries, headed by Commissioners (political appointees) and Permanent Secretaries.

State Civil Service Commission

Parastatals and Agencies e.g., State Water Boards, State Broadcasting Corporations.

c. The Local Government Level

At the local government level, the public service consists of:

The Local Government Chairman, the political head.

Supervisory Councilors, in charge of various departments (like health, education, works, etc.).

Career Officers, the permanent staff who carry out day-to-day administrative duties.

Head of Local Government Administration (HLGA), the most senior civil servant at this level.

This study is significant because it provides a contemporary analysis of how prebendalism shapes governance and public service delivery in Nigeria. By examining the appropriation of public office for personal and communal gain, the study contributes to academic literature on state politics and patronage while offering insights for policymakers and anti-corruption institutions seeking to strengthen accountability and bureaucratic efficiency Transparency International, (2023). It also highlights the social expectations placed on officeholders, and thus offers a basis for civic re-orientation toward performance-based governance rather than distributive politics (Joseph, 1987; Akinola, 2018; Okoli, 2019).

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of prebendalism on public service delivery in Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Elucidate the concept of prebendalism: Understand its characteristics and manifestations in Nigerian politics/governance.
2. Assess effects on service delivery in Nigeria.
3. Identify contributing factors to prebendal politics in Nigeria.
4. Explicate the consequences of prebendal politics on Nigeria's public service delivery.
5. Recommend reforms/strategies that can eliminate prebendal politics from Nigeria's public service.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Neo-patrimonialism as its theoretical framework. Neo-patrimonialism is a political theory developed to explain governance in post-colonial states, particularly in developing countries, where formal modern institutions co-exist with informal patrimonial practices (Ogbeidi, 2012). It describes a political system in which the institutional trappings of a modern state, such as a constitution, bureaucracy, elections, and legal codes, exist alongside the personalisation of power, patronage networks, and the informal exchange of favours (Akinola, 2018). The conceptual foundation of neo-patrimonialism is drawn from Max Weber's (1947) typology of legitimate authority. Weber identified three ideal types: traditional authority, grounded in customs and hereditary rule; charismatic authority, resting on the extraordinary personal qualities of a leader; and legal-rational authority, based on codified laws and impersonal bureaucratic rules. In a patrimonial system, a variant of traditional authority, the ruler treats the state as private property. Authority is exercised through personal loyalty rather than through formal office or law, and public resources are deployed to sustain a network of clients (Ogbeidi, 2012).

The prefix "neo" captures the contemporary fusion of this patrimonial logic with the structures of the modern state. In neo-patrimonial states, ministries, parliaments, political parties, and civil services exist and function formally. However, substantive decision-making and resource allocation are determined by informal relationships, loyalty, and patronage (Akinola, 2018). The political leader or ruling elite maintains authority by distributing state resources, contracts, appointments, and privileges to clients. In return, these clients provide political support, mobilisation, and protection for the leader. Consequently, there is no clear separation between the public and private spheres. State resources are routinely diverted for personal and political gain, while formal rules are applied selectively to reward allies and sanction opponents. Neo-patrimonialism has become a dominant explanatory framework in political science, African studies, and comparative politics for understanding persistent corruption, institutional weakness, and poor governance in many post-colonial states, despite the adoption of democratic and bureaucratic structures (Ogbeidi, 2012).

The adoption of neo-patrimonialism is germane to this study of prebendalism and public service delivery in Nigeria. The theory provides analytical leverage for understanding why formal institutions in Nigeria are often subverted by informal practices. In line with Joseph's (1987) notion of prebendalism, neo-patrimonialism explains how political office-holders treat public office as a source of personal benefit and as a mechanism for distributing state resources to ethnic, regional, and partisan clienteles. This dynamic produces the "national cake" mentality, in which competing groups struggle to access state resources, and it places communal pressure on office-holders to privilege kinship and

loyalty over merit and the public interest (Akinola, 2018; Okoli, 2019; Achebe, 1983). Thus, neo-patrimonialism helps to explain the gap between formal rules and actual governance outcomes in Nigeria. It accounts for why constitutional provisions and bureaucratic procedures are routinely bypassed, why accountability mechanisms remain weak, and why public service delivery continues to suffer despite institutional reforms (Ake, 1996; Obi, 2010). By situating the study within this framework, the research interrogates how the fusion of legal-rational institutions and patrimonial practices sustains prebendal politics and undermines effective governance in Nigeria.

Analysis

This research critically examined prebendalism as a major obstacle to effective governance and service delivery in Nigeria's public sector. Prebendalism, characterized by the use of public office for personal and ethnic patronage, undermines democratic governance, weakens institutions, and promotes inefficiency, corruption, and inequity in resource distribution. The study explored its nature, manifestations, effects, and contributing factors, and proposed actionable reforms to mitigate its pervasive influence on Nigeria's public administration.

Findings revealed that prebendalism is deeply entrenched in Nigeria's political culture, sustained by weak institutions, centralized power structures, patronage politics, and limited civic awareness. These practices have led to poor service delivery, resource misallocation, and public distrust in government. Furthermore, prebendalism perpetuates social inequality, promotes ethnic favoritism, and stifles meritocracy within the public service system.

To address these challenges, the study recommends comprehensive reforms across political, institutional, and socio-cultural dimensions. Firstly, civic education and ethical leadership training should be institutionalized to promote political awareness, accountability, and national consciousness (Mustapha, 2009). Secondly, public institutions such as the civil service, anti-corruption agencies, and the judiciary must be strengthened and insulated from political interference, with performance indicators introduced to ensure efficiency. Thirdly, reforming electoral financing, enhancing fiscal federalism, and empowering anti-corruption bodies like the ICPC and EFCC are vital to reducing dependence on patronage networks. Additionally, the research emphasizes the need to establish public accountability frameworks that promote open governance, transparency, and whistleblower protection. Meritocracy should be institutionalized in all tiers of government through fair recruitment, promotion, and evaluation systems. The adoption of e-governance and digital transparency tools will further help to minimize corruption and enhance service delivery. Lastly, strengthening the roles of civil society, the media, and judicial institutions is essential for fostering accountability and restoring public confidence in governance.

Discussion

The discussion is anchored on neo-patrimonial theory and draws on existing literature to explain the dynamics of prebendal politics and its implications for public service delivery in Nigeria.

Elucidating the Concept of Prebendalism and Its Manifestations in Nigerian Politics and Governance

Prebendalism refers to a political practice in which state offices are regarded as prebends from which officeholders extract benefits for personal use and for the benefit of their kin, ethnic, and patronage networks (Joseph, 1987; Diamond, 1988). It represents the appropriation of public institutions for private accumulation and the distribution of state resources based on loyalty rather than merit or bureaucratic procedure. In the Nigerian context, prebendalism manifests through the monetization of political office, godfatherism, and the "national cake" mentality (Okoli, 2019). Political appointments, contract awards, budgetary allocations, and even bureaucratic positions are often treated as instruments of patronage. Public officeholders are under communal pressure to "bring something home," leading to the diversion of resources meant for public goods to personal and group interests (Akinola, 2018; Chabal, 1999). This practice aligns with neo-patrimonial logic, in which formal institutions exist but substantive decisions are shaped by informal networks of loyalty and exchange (Ogbeidi, 2012; Ekeh, 1975). Consequently, the boundary between public service and private interest remains blurred, and accountability mechanisms are routinely circumvented.

Prebendalism is greatly manifested in the following forms:

- **Patronage Politics:** Officeholders often use public positions to distribute favors such as jobs, contracts, and licenses to loyal supporters and ethnic or clientelistic networks. This culture of patronage encourages loyalty over merit and undermines professionalism and efficiency within the public service.

- **Ethno-Clientelistic Networks:** Prebendalism relies heavily on ethnic, regional, and communal ties for political mobilization and the sharing of national resources. This has created competition for “the national cake”, in which resources are allocated based on ethnic and regional interests rather than on fairness or need.
- **Corruption and Rent-Seeking:** The system promotes corruption through the misuse of public funds, nepotism, and rent-seeking for private gain (Ogbeidi, 2012; Ojo, 2014). Public offices are often seen as opportunities for personal enrichment rather than as instruments for national development.
- **Weak Accountability and Governance:** Prebendal practices weaken accountability and transparency in governance. Institutions become inefficient when offices are used primarily for patronage rather than for public service delivery, leading to poor performance and a lack of public trust.
- **Impact on Service Delivery:** Prebendalism severely affects efficient public service delivery. Basic sectors such as healthcare, education, water supply, and infrastructure suffer because of resource misallocation and corruption. Citizens often experience poor services despite large government spending.
- **Political Appointments and Contracts:** Many appointments and contracts are awarded based on loyalty or ethnicity rather than on merit and competence. This practice undermines institutional effectiveness, as unqualified individuals occupy critical government positions.
- **Budget Padding and Resource Misuse:** Lawmakers and public officials sometimes insert inflated or unnecessary sums into the national budget for personal or sectional benefit. Such dishonest practices lead to waste of public funds and hinder national development.
- **Godfatherism:** Godfatherism involves powerful political patrons influencing elections, appointments, and policies for personal or group gains. This undermines good governance, promotes corruption, and reduces accountability in the political system.

Assessing the effects of prebendal politics on service delivery in Nigeria

The findings indicate that prebendal politics has had significant detrimental effects on public service delivery in Nigeria. The prioritization of patronage over competence has resulted in the appointment of unqualified persons into strategic positions, thereby undermining bureaucratic efficiency and institutional performance (Joseph, 1987). When public offices are treated as avenues for personal and group accumulation, meritocracy is eroded and professional standards in the civil service are compromised (Akinola, 2018; Ezenwa, 2019).

Furthermore, the diversion of public funds for clientelist purposes reduces the resources available for critical sectors such as health, education, water supply, and infrastructure. This leads to poor service outputs, abandoned projects, and weak policy implementation across ministries, departments, and agencies (Okoli, 2019). Citizens’ access to basic services often becomes contingent on political affiliation, ethnic ties, or personal connections rather than on citizenship rights and constitutional provisions.

This practice contradicts the principles of legal-rational authority as articulated by Weber (1947) and the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), and reinforces a governance system where service delivery is politicized and inequitable. The selective application of rules and the use of state resources to reward loyalists further weaken accountability mechanisms and institutional legitimacy. The cumulative effect is a decline in public trust, increased citizen alienation, and the perpetuation of underdevelopment in Nigeria.

The effects of prebendalism are:

Corruption and Resource Misallocation: Prebendalism fuels corruption through the misuse of public funds, nepotism, and rent-seeking for personal gain. Resources meant for public welfare are often diverted to private pockets. **Inefficiency and Poor Service Delivery:** By prioritizing patronage over meritocracy, prebendalism leads to inefficiency in public institutions. Sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure suffer due to mismanagement and incompetence (Hyden, 2006).

Weak Accountability and Governance: Prebendal practices weaken institutional transparency and accountability. Offices are often used for political patronage rather than for genuine public service delivery.

Ethno-Clientelistic Politics: Political leaders use ethnic and regional ties as channels for distributing resources, promoting competition over “the national cake” and deepening divisions in society (Okoli, 2019).

Impact on Citizen Welfare: Prebendalism exacerbates poverty, inequality, and unemployment by limiting access to essential services, including education and healthcare.

Erosion of Public Trust: The persistent corruption and inefficiency associated with prebendalism have eroded citizens' confidence in government institutions.

Hindrance to National Development: Resource misallocation and corruption under prebendal systems slow national development and create widespread underdevelopment despite abundant resources (Nwabueze, 2015).

Budget Padding and Resource Abuse: Lawmakers sometimes inflate or manipulate budget figures for personal or sectional benefit, undermining development and public accountability.

Identifying contributing factors to prebendal politics in Nigeria

Several factors account for the persistence of prebendal politics in Nigeria. First, the historical legacy of colonial administration established a centralized state with enormous control over resources, which post-colonial elites inherited and personalized (Ogbeidi, 2012; Ibeanu, 2006). Second, weak institutionalization and the absence of strong checks and balances enable political actors to manipulate state structures with minimal constraints (Akinola, 2018). Third, ethno-regional competition and the struggle for access to state resources foster a zero-sum political culture where groups seek to capture the state to secure benefits for their members (Joseph, 1987). Fourth, poverty and economic dependence on the state make citizens vulnerable to clientelist exchanges. Finally, the monetization of elections and party politics incentivizes officeholders to recover campaign expenses through the misuse of public office (Okoli, 2019). These factors collectively entrench a political environment where prebendal practices thrive.

Explicating the consequences of prebendal politics on public service delivery in Nigeria

The consequences of prebendal politics are both institutional and socio-economic. Institutionally, prebendalism erodes bureaucratic rationality, weakens the rule of law, and promotes selective application of regulations to favor political allies (Ogbeidi, 2012). It also encourages corruption, as public resources are treated as private property (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

Socioeconomically, the consequences include infrastructural decay, poor-quality social services, and widening inequality (Akinola, 2018). Because resource allocation is driven by patronage rather than need or efficiency, development projects are often abandoned or poorly executed once political calculations change. In addition, prebendalism undermines meritocracy and discourages professionalism in the civil service, leading to demotivation and brain drain (Joseph, 1987). Ultimately, the practice perpetuates underdevelopment and sustains a cycle of poor governance and citizen alienation.

Recommending reforms and strategies to eliminate prebendal politics from Nigeria's public service

To address prebendal politics, institutional, legal, and socio-political reforms are needed. First, there must be a strengthening of legal-rational institutions through the independence of anti-corruption agencies, the judiciary, and oversight bodies to ensure accountability (Ogbeidi, 2012; Lewis, 2007). Second, civil service reforms that emphasize merit, professionalism, and security of tenure will reduce the influence of patronage in appointments and promotions (Akinola, 2018). Third, electoral reforms aimed at reducing the cost of politics and limiting the role of money in elections can diminish the incentive for political officeholders to engage in prebendal accumulation (Okoli, 2019). Fourth, civic education and value re-orientation are necessary to shift public expectations from distributive politics to performance-based governance. Citizens must be sensitized to demand accountability rather than patronage. Finally, decentralization of power and resources to subnational units, coupled with transparency in budgetary processes, can reduce the concentration of resources that fuels prebendal competition (Joseph, 1987).

Conclusion

Prebendalism remains one of the most persistent challenges undermining effective governance and service delivery in Nigeria's public service. The study has shown that the practice, rooted in the misuse of public offices for personal and ethnic gains, erodes institutional integrity, weakens accountability, and perpetuates corruption and inefficiency (Nwabueze, 2015). It thrives in an environment where loyalty is valued over merit, and where political patronage replaces professionalism and transparency. The findings highlight that prebendalism not only distorts democratic governance but also fuels inequality, marginalization, and poor service outcomes in key sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. It undermines public trust, hampers national development, and entrenches a culture of impunity and rent-seeking within the public sector. To overcome these challenges, the study underscores the need for a comprehensive reform agenda that strengthens institutions, promotes transparency, and fosters meritocracy. Civic education and ethical leadership training are vital to reshape political behavior and public service values (Nwabueze,

2015). Strengthening institutional autonomy, reforming electoral finance systems, and empowering anti-corruption agencies will help curb patronage networks. Furthermore, enforcing open governance, whistle-blower protection, and e-governance systems will promote transparency and accountability across government structures. In essence, eradicating prebendalism requires strong political will, active citizen engagement, and a renewed commitment to the principles of integrity, equity, and justice. When public institutions operate on the principles of merit and transparency, Nigeria's public service can evolve into a truly people-oriented system that advances national development and democratic governance.

Suggestions

1. The government should integrate civic education into governance training to educate public servants, politicians, and citizens on the dangers of prebendalism and to promote political awareness and ethical governance. The government should establish mandatory leadership and ethics courses for elected and appointed officials to discourage the perception of public office as personal property. The government should also launch nationwide media campaigns through television, radio, and social media to enlighten citizens about prebendalism and its impact on democracy and development. Universities and research institutions should be encouraged to conduct ongoing research on prebendalism and publish data-driven findings to inform policy reforms. Political parties should be compelled to adopt internal democracy policies that discourage favoritism, nepotism, and ethnic bias in nominations and appointments.
2. The government should strengthen the autonomy of key public institutions, including the civil service, anti-corruption agencies, and the judiciary, to ensure they operate free from political interference and can deliver services effectively. The government should implement Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for ministries and agencies to track efficiency and penalize poor service delivery linked to prebendal practices. The government should provide the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, and Code of Conduct Bureau with adequate funding, autonomy, and enforcement powers to check prebendal practices.
3. The government should promote transparency through e-governance by adopting digital platforms for procurement, budgeting, and service tracking to reduce human manipulation and corruption. The government should empower citizens to monitor and report public service performance through community scorecards and citizen report cards. The government should also enhance fiscal federalism by granting states and local governments greater fiscal autonomy to reduce excessive centralization that fuels competition for federal patronage.
4. The government should reform electoral financing by introducing strict campaign finance laws to curb godfatherism and reduce politicians' dependence on patronage networks. The government should promote inclusive policies and equitable representation to discourage ethnic favoritism in appointments and resource distribution. The government should establish special anti-corruption courts and ensure speedy trials of public officers implicated in prebendal practices.
5. The government should institutionalize a public accountability framework by introducing open-government initiatives that compel regular public disclosure of budgets, expenditures, and project outcomes. The government should establish measurable service standards across sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure to identify inefficiencies caused by prebendalism. The government should strengthen legislative committees and judicial review to sanction public officers involved in patronage or corruption. The government should fully implement and enforce whistle-blower protection policies to encourage citizens and civil servants to expose prebendal practices.
6. The government should institutionalize meritocracy by enforcing merit-based recruitment, promotion, and appointments across all tiers of government to eliminate favoritism and nepotism. The government should deploy e-procurement systems, open budget portals, and digital audit trails to make corruption and patronage more difficult. The government should strengthen the role of non-governmental organisations, journalists, and watchdog groups to hold leaders accountable and to advocate for transparency.

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