

## RETHINKING ELITE TRANSFORMATION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

Elitism has become a serious topic of academic discussion in the developing world, largely to its link with conflict and insecurity in some states. Recent scholarships on elite-security nexus has suggested that the escalation of most violent conflicts in Africa can be traced to elite's (in)action. This article forms part of a broader research agenda investigating the linkage between the Nigerian political elite and national insecurity. The article assesses and challenges the elitist view that articulates and upholds the dominance of the military elite among other elite groups in contemporary Nigeria, despite the country now under a civilian dispensation since 1999. The findings posits that while retired military 'Generals' have been conspicuous in every facets of Nigerian politics due to their power and influence accumulated under several years of military authoritarianism; there is an emergence of other elites who have become relevant and domineering in the politics of the country.

**Keywords:** Economic Renewal, Elite Theory, Nigeria, Military Retirees, Political Elite.

### INTRODUCTION

By mid-1999, years of military rule gave way to a civilian democratic dispensation in Nigeria. This period of a new political dispensation herein referred to as 'recivilianized Nigeria' because the state was briefly under a previous civilian administration in 1979-1983; brought about the emergence of a retired military 'General' as the new civilian president and Head-of-State in person of Olusegun Obasanjo. Aside this, there was an influx of other military retirees into the political scene either through political party electioneering or political appointment by means of patronage or clientelism (Adesola & Ako-Nai, 2010; Campbell, 2010). But with many state actors often involved in managing the affairs of a state (Hanneman, 1986), the emergent military elite had to govern the state with other non-military elite groups such as the professional, economic and socio-cultural elites who will all form the political elites of the country. Most importantly, while the military elite comprises of individuals who had been administrators both at federal and state levels in previous military administrations, and can be adjudged to be experienced within the jurisdiction of national politics; same

cannot be said of their human resource skill in the area of international political economy that involves the management of the economic and socio-political affairs of the state both at the local and global level (Adesola&Ako-Nai, 2010). Thus, the need to involve the bureaucrats, technocrats, intellectuals and accomplished businessmen as partners in the management of state affairs.

Moreover, the national agitation for economic renewal that favours the diversification of the national economy from a mono cultural one that relies on oil and the rents that accrue from it to one that will be more industrialised; and modernise other economic sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and telecommunication made the recruitment of other elites outside the military that has the necessary skill a national priority (George et al., 2012). As a result, the 1999 civilian administration of retired General Olusegun Obasanjo recruited some seasoned technocrats from international organisations and renowned bureaucrats and civil servants to steer the affairs of the state towards a new economic agenda that will address the global position of the democratic state. While the change that took place can sometimes be exaggerated because most of the authoritarian features under military rule were witnessed in the early part of the new civilian administration known as the fourth republic in the political lexicon of the country, there was a radical change in the sense that some of the newly recruited political elites were given free hand to make policy decisions that impact on national life (Okonjo-Iweala, 2012). This was a long step towards cabinet political power-sharing coming from a group of elites, military in this case, who had hitherto not embraced the idea of devolving power or outsourcing control.

Certain scholars have argued that the military elite were only using the professional elites comprising the intellectuals, technocrats and bureaucrats; and the economic elites comprising entrepreneurs and accomplished businessmen to gain legitimacy, safeguard personal interests and disguise the authoritarian background of these military retirees (Isumonah, 2012; Ewharieme, 2011). However, this does not deduce the fact that the emergent non-military elites has become a major and dominant power factor in the political game being played out in contemporary Nigeria as evidenced in this study. It is this finding that led to the arguments to be advanced in this article that:

- Contemporary elite-formation in Nigeria was conditioned by the different processes of governance and economic renewal going on in the country.
- A major consequence of this is the political maturing of three different elite networks (the military, professional and economic elite groups).
- This political maturing as a result of economic and structural reform has gradually reshaped the balance of power within the elite-networks in the corridor of power.
- There is no dominant elite-network as individuals with skill-roles that involves the ability to perform complex operations have been recruited and they have extended their scope of authority and influence as a result.

Starting from these arguments, it will be worthwhile to clarify the elitist perspective of politics and how this has been used by various scholars to analyse elite-composition and transformation in contemporary Nigeria. This becomes necessary because of recent scholarships that has continued to give credence to the dominance of the military elite in contemporary Nigerian politics. The scholars such as (Afuape, 2012; Ntiwunka, 2012; Kifordu, 2011; Adesola&Ako-Nai, 2010; Banjo, 2008; Adekanye, 1999) through their historical and elitist analysis have argued that the military elite in Nigeria that comprises retired military ‘Generals’ have continued to play more active and dominant role in Nigerian political landscape. While this point of view is grounded in the elite theory of political power and confirms historical facts relating to Nigerian politics, because the country was under military authoritarianism for several years; ascribing continued dominance to the military elites within the corridor of power in a recivilianized Nigeria stands in need of investigation.

## **CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

The elite theory emphasises the concentration of power in the hands of a small group known as the ‘elite’ in any given society (Bachrach, 2010; Welsh, 1979; Bottomore, 1964). It reflect an attempt to study the political processes through the relationships within different social classes in the society. This small group is referred to as the ‘Guardians’ by Plato who is regarded as the ancestor of all elitism in his book ‘Republic’ (Schwarzmantel, 1987:64). Other proponents of classical elitism as in Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels agree on the concentration of power in the hands of a leading minority (Zuckerman, 1977). Arguing that the minority

possesses the instruments of power through which the will of the society is realized. Added to the growing list of elitist scholars are Joseph Schumpeter, Giovanni Sartori, Karl Mannheim and James Burnham. They all agree on the inevitability of an 'establishment' in any given society, an establishment made up of the political class, a controlling minority or a ruling group depending on individuals choice of terminology. With the elitists, the division in any society is the elite-mass dichotomy, where one is so sure of its power and always willing to use it despite being small in size and the other always submissive to the elite despite being the larger group (Odubajo, 2009).

How this ruling minority changes in terms of character and composition has been a classic problem in the social sciences because political scientists, sociologists, historians and international relations experts have tried to analyse changes in elite composition knowing well that elite composition is dynamic in all political modernization (Pedersen, 1976:5). All societies undergoing change substitutes one elite with another through a process of recruitment by either peaceful means or the use of force (Odubajo, 2009). Pareto (1935) in his 'circulation of elites' perspective articulated that "no association can function without a dominant class. However, this class is not guaranteed longevity and is unavoidably subject to decay; a new dominant class arises from the people" This transfer of power from old to new hands becomes a contentious issue within elitist scholars (Zuckerman, 1977). Michels(1949) for example differed from Pareto on his absolute change in leadership notion. Michels argued that the amalgamation between old and new elites happens perennially, with both set of elites reaching compromise on how to rule as a single unit.

A critical flaw in the articulation of elite theory despite its empirical testimony is it focus on a single social class in its analysis of political processes. Opponents argued that while political outcomes emanates from the elite class, the formulation processes are orchestrated by the various demands presented by society notwithstanding the type of government in power, be it military or civilian (Odubajo, 2009). Against this backdrop, the power-sharing arrangement within the Nigerian political elites can benefit from both elitist and non-elitist perspectives. These two opposing views can assist in understanding the power-play at the heart of a society on the path of economic renewals exemplified in the Nigerian case. As a result, the transformation of the

Nigerian political elite thus become an issue of dynamic analysis which will be scrutinised further here.

Retired General Olusegun Obasanjo became the first civilian president under the new 1999 federal constitution of Nigeria. The constitution included provisions such as separation of power, federalism and multiparty system. The presidential system of government was readopted in the 1999 constitution where the Federal Executive Council (the cabinet) is to be headed by an executive president, ably assisted by a vice president and a body of appointed ministers (Nigerian 1999 federal constitution). Section 5, sub-section 1a and 1b of the constitution stipulates that the “executive powers of the federation shall be vested in the President and may, subject to any law made by the National Assembly, be exercised by him [sic] either directly or through the Vice-President and Ministers of the Government of the Federation or Officers in the Public Service of the Federation”.

With its ascension to power in 1999, the Nigerian political executive elite headed by Obasanjo recruited men and women from the military establishment and civilians alike who had served under various military regimes (Osha, 2011; Campbell, 2010). Also recruited to the political elite group were bureaucrats and technocrats (Adesola&Ako-Nai, 2010) herein referred to as professionals. These professionals consisted of internationally renowned technocrats who have made their marks working for international financial institutions and other global organisations. Notable among them was Dr.NgoziOkonjo-Iweala, a renowned female economist with the World Bank who later became its managing director; ObyEzekwesili, a chartered accountant and co-founder of ‘Transparency International’ who later became World Bank Vice President for Africa region overseeing a lending portfolio of over \$40 billion cutting across 48 African countries (News Express, 2012). The wielding of power by these political elites has sometimes led to elite-mass as well as intra-institutional crises between the executive and the legislature (Oteh&Eze, 2012).

By 2007, elections were conducted and Obasanjo relinquished power to his preferred candidates: president Umaru Musa Yar’adua and vice-president Goodluck Jonathan (Campbell, 2010:98-100). This was after his failed bid to go for a third term that was not provided for in the 1999 federal constitution (Simon & Monday, 2011).In his book,

‘The Accidental Civil Servant’ El-Rufai (2013) narrated how the core economic team members comprising some of the bureaucrats and technocrats in the cabinet pressed it on Obasanjo that he has to relinquish power despite the fact he was not willing to. The president eventually left office paving the way for a new civilian president in person of Umaru Musa Yar’adua. The new president from a Fulani elite family in northern Nigerian state of Katsina happened to be the junior brother to one-time Obasanjo’s deputy, Shehu Musa Yar’adua during his military administration in 1976-1979. Umaru Yar’adua was the state governor of his state, Katsina, before been handpicked by Obasanjo to vie for the presidency (Campbell, 2010:99). The election that brought him to power was widely condemned as fraudulent due to the massive irregularities that were reported (Omotola, 2011; Tenuche, 2011). His state of health made him seek medical help abroad while his deputy, Jonathan stepped in as acting-president in 2009 and later as president in 2010 when Umaru Yar’adua passed away (Adeniyi, 2011:175-198).

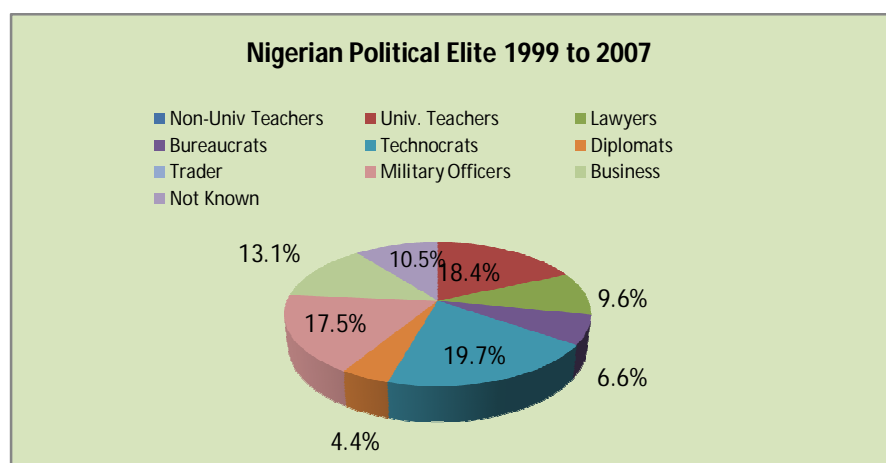
Goodluck Jonathan later contested a general election in 2011 which he won (Awopeju, 2012). Thus becoming the third executive president after the 1999 military to civilian rule transformation. Jonathan was a deputy governor in the Niger Delta state of Bayelsa but later became the governor when his boss, the then governor, Diepreye Alamiesigba, was indicted in economic fraud and money laundering case before being arrested in London while on a foreign trip (Okolie, 2010). As will be expected by those familiar with Nigerian politics, a sizeable number of the political actors in 2013 are still the same set of people since 1999. A situation certain analysts refers to as the recycling of the political gladiators (Adesola&Ako-Nai, 2010). This is more so because successive presidents after Obasanjo have been individuals handpicked by him to succeed him and probably protect his interests and that of his loyalists (Omodia, 2011). This has given rise to a situation of patron-client network both at national and state level as retired Generals have become leaders of elite sub-groups whom the various networks cleave on to for support (Bello, 2011; Omotola, 2011). A collaboration that has sometimes undermined political stability due to intra- and inter-elite competition (Oteh&Eze, 2012).

### **COMPOSITION OF THE NIGERIAN POLITICAL ELITE 1999-2013**

The transition from military to civilian rule in 1999 brought about an elite alliance that was to further the course of economic development. While it cannot be argued that the Nigerian democratic process that started in 1999 brought about the dominance of retired military officers within the country's political space as claimed by various elite scholars already accounted for; the contentious issue is how does one account for the influence, control and authority some other characters outside the military elite network has come to play in the better part of the 21st century in Nigeria? As dominant as the retired military Generals might have been at the initial stage of a recivilianized Nigeria because of their ability to impose political actors and influence policy-decisions through party politics (Ntiwunka, 2012); the reality is that other elites have emerged either by design or accident that have become dominant and influential in the policy domain of state governance most especially from 2007 onward.

Kifordu (2011) identified five elite networks within the core political executive elite in Nigeria namely: military elite, socio-cultural elite, economic elite, traditional institutional elite and the political elite. The military elite in Nigeria is classified as being at the topmost level of the political elite hierarchy. Their participation in politics post-1999 had thrown up a complex contradiction, because rather than just being involved in active politics, this elite group has been the guarantor of continuity in political offices and positions (Tenuche, 2011). As Campbell (2010:24-27) observed, retired Generals who are leaders of their different military sub-elite groups at national level included Theophilus Danjuma, Ibrahim Babangida, Mohammed Abubakar and Olusegun Obasanjo. While only three out of the four were former military Head-of-State pre-1999, they have all been involved in coup planning and execution at some point in their careers (Adekanye, 1999). These military-cum-political elites are seen as leaders of their different elite networks whose utterances and beliefs can be deduced from the actions of their loyalists in government (Isumonah, 2012; Ewharieme, 2011). Thus when Obasanjo in his first administration post-1999 appointed individuals from the uniformed sector into office, it became apparent that these individuals will form the inner caucus of the political elite decision-making machinery especially in the area of security (Tenuche, 2011).

Individuals such as retired General Theophilus Danjuma, a former chief of army staff was appointed defence minister; retired General Abdullahi Mohammed, a one-time director of military intelligence was appointed chief of staff; retired General Mohammed Gusau was appointed national security adviser; Tony Anenih of the national police was appointed minister and AtikuAbubakar of the customs service was appointed vice-president (Tenuche, 2011). Figure 1 below shows a graphical representation of the 228 political executive cabinet positions between 1999 and 2007 under the Obasanjo civilian administrations. Military officers made up 17.5% of the cabinet, technocrats made up 19.7%, intellectuals like university lecturers made up 18.4% and businessmen made up 13.1% of the cabinet. This is to illustrate that despite power being concentrated in the hands of a minority few as elitist writers in Nigeria has proclaimed; the ruling minority consists of an amalgamation of different elites with some as dominant and influential as their military counterparts as a result of their professional role which the military retirees could not perform. Therefore the non-military elites influence and power cannot be overlooked when analysing contemporary Nigerian politics, as doing so will amount to an underestimation of the critical breaks inherent in the political change sweeping across a new Nigeria despite the historical dominance of the state military elite.



*Data sourced from Kifordu, 2011*

Figure 1 – Professional Profile of Nigerian Executive Political Elite 1999 to 2007

For example, an emergent force that pulls weight within the state political arena is the technocrat in person of Mrs NgoziOkonjo-Iweala, an economist with the World Bank. She served under the Obasanjo administration as Minister for Finance for two terms and

briefly as Foreign Affairs Minister before she left in 2006. Under her spell as Finance Minister, she negotiated a deal with the Paris Club which is a group of bilateral creditors and paid off US \$12 billion of Nigeria's external debt in return for an \$18 billion debt write-off (Okonjo-Iweala, 2012; Afuape, 2012). She also ensured transparency by regularly publishing disbursements from the federation account on monthly basis and helped Nigeria achieve its first ever sovereign credit rating (of BB minus) from an international ratings agency (Okonjo-Iweala, 2012). A monumental feat in a country considered as one of the most corrupt in the world by Transparency International yearly reports since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century till date (Transparency International, 2012). It was no surprise that she was shortlisted for the post of World Bank President in 2012 even though she had re-emerged in the new Jonathan administration as the Minister of Finance and the Chief Coordinating Minister of the Economy in 2011. Apart from overseeing every government ministry, department and agency budgetary allocations and revenue expenditures; her other areas of influence as the Coordinating Minister for the Economy in Nigeria is the states' 'Anti-Corruption Campaign' that has led to the prosecution of certain individuals indicted in the fuel subsidy scam (Campbell, 2010:19-23). The 'Sovereign Wealth Fund' (SWF) that is designed to guarantee the availability of infrastructural fund for critical areas of the Nigerian economy and a stabilisation fund that will cushion the effect of any budget variations at any given time are part of her portfolio as well. She also initiated ports reforms to tackle issues of inefficiency and corruption in Nigerian ports, which she implemented in working partnership with the Presidential Committee on Ports Reform (FMF, 2013). She has sometimes been described as the most powerful cabinet member after the President (Forbes, 2013).

There are other acclaimed businessmen and industrialists, who seek to safeguard their privileged position in the society by trying to maintain their status quo through initiating and supporting policies that will safeguard their interests and maximize their profit (Adesola&Ako-Nai, 2010). These elite members might not necessarily be in official state political positions by themselves but can sponsor their cronies to such strategic positions (Tenuche, 2011). Thus either in policy-making roles or outside government, these economic elites in Nigeria can influence government policies through their social networks. Examples of ring-leaders within the economic elite group are Aliko Dangote, founder of the Dangote Group ranked the richest person in Africa and the 43rd in the

world by Forbes Magazine in 2013 (Forbes, 2013; Campbell, 2010:27). Mike Adenuga Jr., founder of ConOil and Globacom which is the second largest telecommunication firm in Nigeria. He is ranked the 5th richest man in Africa and 267 in the world by Forbes. Femi Otedola, founder of Zenoil who also appeared in Forbes 2009 as one of the 793 dollar-denominated billionaires in the world is another domineering figure within the political circle though as an outsider (Afuape, 2012; Kawu, 2009). Others include personalities who has made it to the Forbes List of 40 African richest business people in 2012 such as Jim Ovia, founder of Zenith Bank Group; Oba Otudeko, founder of Honeywell Group; Hakeem Bello Osagie, founder of petroleum consultancy 'CTIC' and ex-chairman of United Bank of Africa. A notable attribute of this elite group is that most of them made their wealth through oil and gas business ventures (Thisday, 2012). Social network is vital to the recruitment of these elite members into the political circus, little surprising that the economic elite has been the major players when it comes to political party financing and sponsorship in Nigeria. This paves the way for them to permeate political structure of authority in furtherance of their personal interests (Nnamdi, 2006).

A notable point of diversion of this study from previous scholarship on elite transformation in Nigeria is the observed diminishing status of the military retirees in contemporary Nigerian politics. While other elite groups such as the economic comprising businessmen, industrialists and entrepreneurs, and the professionals comprising bureaucrats, technocrats and intellectuals have been on the rise and found their voice against military hegemony; the traditionally dominating retired military officers on the other hand have seen their influence been on the downward slope most especially since the year 2007 (BBC News, 2007). How low will this downward trend reach or what will be its terminus? This might be a good point of inquiry for another study. However, political developments points to the fact that military hegemony has become denigrated in a recivilianized Nigeria both by changes in governance structure and a redirection of Nigeria's political economy. Priscilla Nwikpo (2013) summed it all up in an interview with the researcher "...there is a political elite in Nigeria and within this elite is an inner circle referred to as the 'cabal' or 'political gladiators'. The 2011 elections brought new entrants into this clique that takes major policy decisions

within governance and I believe the forthcoming 2015 election will further disrupt the composition of this elite group”.

In summary, the political elite is classified as being at the uppermost section of the elite hierarchy in Nigeria, because of its role as initiator and supervisor of policies at federal level of governance (Kifordu, 2011:47). It is the elite group that integrates all other elite networks into its fold with implication for power structuring at national level of governance (Isumonah, 2012; Tenuche, 2011). Because of its role as policy initiator and the fact that the Nigerian political elite comprises all other elite groups within the country, it therefore remains a subject of scholarly discussion and unit of dynamic analysis by different writers. However, certain scholars seems to underestimate the relevance of other elite groups because of their over-concentration on historical facts at the expense of contemporary realities.

This study argues that the new body politics of Nigeria that began with the May 1999 transition from military to civilian rule transformed the nature and character of the political elite in the state. The new and evolving force produced by this transformation has prevented the dominance of a single elite network in the management of state affairs. This was not surprising given the level of political change and economic renewal going on in the country. The military elite recruited other managerial elites to help in repositioning the country towards a new global order but could not prevent these elites from becoming a major force to reckon with. This transformative period that is characterised by active state involvement in the political economy of the country threw up an alliance in which a coalition of military retirees, professionals and representatives of local business concerns formed an alliance of military, professional and big business to control state power (George et al., 2012; Adekanye, 1999:132-141). This strategy of securing the positions of certain elites or private entrepreneurs had a profound effect on elite-formation and governance in general, as it posits unequal distribution of rewards, private capital accumulation and socio-economic inequalities (Oteh&Eze, 2012; Omotola, 2011). The social classes that emerged from these imbalances have been dubbed the elite and the masses or the wealthy and the poor - labels that has contributed to further grievances (Afuape, 2012; Odubajo, 2009). It is thus evident that the dominant contemporary political elite in Nigeria comprises of

professionals, entrepreneurs and military officers who have either been in government or have unrestricted access to the corridor of power.

The classical elite theory perspective which is based on the thoughts of classical elitists like Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels considers the elite as group of individuals with significant access to resources or capacities; a feature reminiscent of the Nigerian political elite. But the theory's over-concentration on the small and influential elite group with common interests makes its applicability to the Nigerian case to be contentious. The history of national elites in Nigeria is the history of intra - and inter - group rivalry and struggle. Even though C. Wright Mills (1959) proposed that power is engrained in the hands of few individuals drawn from the triad of political, economic and military institutions which best illustrate the Nigerian case; there is growing evidence that other compelling factors have motivated the recruitment of these elites rather than just the aim to retain power alone. Hence, elitism as a theory should be cautiously applied to the Nigerian context .

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has argued that no single elite group authoritatively dominates political decision-making in Nigeria. Changes in elite composition necessitated by the socio-economic and political transformations has triggered off a balance of power within the different groups that make up the political elite. While this changes and its resultant balancing act may be accidental or deliberate depending on one's view, the fact remains that elite transformation does not happen in vacuum but is a part of a larger social engineering as already accounted for in this article. Hence, the political elite of a given society can be adjudged to be both a product and a tool for social change.

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