

Enhancing Local Government Autonomy in Nigeria: Lessons from American Approach

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Abstract

Local governments are sub-national entities created to facilitate grassroots development. In Nigeria, the 1999 Federal constitution (as amended) acknowledged the status of local government as the third tier of government. This status is based on constitutional provisions and extant laws that allow local governments to exercise control in its sphere of jurisdiction. The nature and structure of exchanges and interactions between local government and other tiers of government determine its degree of autonomy. The study utilized secondary data through content analysis approach within the framework of overlapping model of intergovernmental relations to examine the structure and operations of local government in two federations – Nigeria and United States of America (USA). Specifically, the influence of local government over its finance, election (politics) and personnel were analyzed to ascertain the reality of local government autonomy in Nigeria. The paper reveals contradictions and abuses of local government autonomy by other tiers of government particularly the state government within the parameters used. Recommendations were made amongst others for constitutional amendment by the National Assembly that reduces the power of the state governments over local governments, adoption of heterogeneous local government structure as well as democratization of more key posts at local government level based on lessons drawn from American approach.

Keywords: Autonomy, local government, overlapping model, finance, personnel.

1. Introduction

Local government exists and operates across different type of government - Federal, unitary and confederal as operated in different sovereign nations of the world. They are expected to meet certain unique needs which other tiers of government may not be adequately able to cater for. Irrespective of the type of government in operation and the form of local government in practice, there is a common trend that underscores the importance of local government in any political and administrative system and that is promotion of development at the grassroots level. All other importance of local government such as promotion of grassroots democracy (Aromalaran, 1977), grooming of future leaders (Sharma, Sadana and Kaur, 2012), as well as reduction of the burden of the Central/Federal government (Joel, 2021) are tied to promotion and sustenance of local development and by extension, national development.

Promotion of grassroots and national development is realizable only where local governments can exercise some measures of independence in the control of areas that are within their jurisdictional responsibilities, particularly in finance, personnel and politics

(elections). An appreciable level of command and control exercised by local governments in these areas undoubtedly empower them to justify the reasons for their creation.

Interesting, local government exists and operate in Nigeria as developing country and the United States of America (USA) as a developed country but with varied autonomy with the later operating independently than the former; hence the need to draw lessons from their operational successes of the later.

The present structure of local government in operation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is largely a product of the 1976 local government reforms which adopted uniformity in the operations of local government compared to heterogeneity of the same in the USA. The choice of comparing the operations of local government in the two countries is informed by some shared characteristics. For instance, both countries operate written and rigid constitution, they practice bicameral legislature, operate Presidential system of government, separation of power with checks and balances and more importantly they both operate Federal constitution which provides for division of powers between the Federal (central) government and the state governments as well as the local governments. These provide the bases for examining local government within two political settings that bear high level resemblance. Be that as it may, striking differences exist between the two structures; the USA is the first and old Federal state (got independence in 1776) in the modern world comprising 50 states and the District of Columbia (DC) (Laxmikanth, 2012). While Nigeria is a fairly new Federal state which got her independence in 1960 and with political evolutions, is comprising 36 states and Federal Capital Tertiary (FCT), Abuja and 774 local government operating in various states and FCT, Abuja as at the year 2024.

There have been hues and cries over the inability of local government to justify the mandate for their creation occasioned by poor performance. The ability of local government in Nigeria to operate successfully and promote development depends on their ability to exercise liberty in certain key areas of their jurisdiction among which are finance, personnel and politics (elections). Since the local government reforms of 1976, and the introduction of other legislations such as State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) as well as creation of certain ministries and agencies particularly by the state governments in Nigeria, the hands of local government to exercise command and control over their finances, personnel and politics (elections) have been tied thereby leaving these responsibilities to be discharged by other tiers of government particularly the state government.

In specific terms, Joel (2021) problematizes local government autonomy when he observed that in Nigeria, there has always been the tendency of state government to dominate the affairs of local government by exercising direct tight control over their finances, personnel and politics. Similarly, Tonwe (2012) as cited by Okafor and Kalu (2023) expressed concern that the existence of local government system in Nigeria is undermined by the activities of Nigerian state governments and as such, it can only be autonomous when states are deprived access to Local Government funds by amending section 162 (5) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) 1999 as amended. Most states as sub-national entities have established institutions which tend to limit the autonomy of local government in addition to the provision of certain laws. The establishment of Local Government Service Commission as well as Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy affairs is cases to be cited. With Nigeria operating as a Federation like the USA where local government autonomy is relatively higher, it is imperative to draw lessons from the later that can assist to provide more tips for the operational success of the former.

The general objective of this paper is to analyze the operations of local government autonomy in Nigeria and USA Federations. The Specific objectives are to: a) examine the

operational structure of local government in both Federations; b) ascertain the level of local government autonomy over finance, personnel and politics (elections) in Nigeria; and c) pinpoint differential lessons from the USA approach.

2. Literature

This paper adopted historical and content analysis approach through the use of secondary data. In this context, existing legal/constitutional provisions as well as publications that relate to local government autonomy were reviewed.

Conceptual Clarifications: Autonomy

Autonomy as a word has been described in different ways depending on the views and intention of the users. Nwabueze (1983) as cited in Adeyemo (2005) defines autonomy under a federal system to mean an arrangement where each government enjoys a separate existence and independence from the control of other governments. Autonomy in this definition is conceived from the intergovernmental relations perspective in a Federation where each tier of government is expected to exist and operate within its own sphere without interference.

Anayochukwu and Ani (2021) defines autonomy within the concept of local government administration as the elbowroom and freedom of the local government to make decisions within the powers and functions assigned to it by the laws within its sphere of influence. This implies free hand available for local government to exercise in controlling its own affairs within the purview of the law without interference. Autonomy is that internal power available for local government to drive its own affairs unhindered as prescribed by the law(s). Autonomy can therefore be defined as freedom available for a person or an entity to act and determine its operation and development unhindered under a broader body or institution. Autonomy does not necessarily mean absolute freedom or control but rather a significant level of freedom within the circumference of the law that a person or an institution can operate to ensure the fulfillment of the mandate for its creation and existence.

Local Government

Local government is conceptualized in different views by different scholars. Aromolaran (1977) conceived local government (or local self-government) as a territorial non-sovereign community bound together by community consciousness and attachment, possessing the legal right and a governmental machinery responsible and responsive to local needs, local conditions, and local sensitivities, but above all, subordinate to the central authority which may be a central or national government. This perspective supports the fact that local government is created to handle problems affecting local communities and this explains the reason why it is also referred to as government at the grassroots.

Lawal (2000) defines local government as that tier of government closest to the people which is established with certain powers to exercise control over the affairs of people in its domain. This definition sees local government as semi-autonomous administrative unit created not only to meet the need of local people but to perform the functions of Federal or national government in local rural communities.

Fajobi (2010) describes local government as a political authority under state decentralizing political power and delegation of authority. This definition point to the fact that local government is a creation of higher government either state or federal for discharging responsibilities or functions assigned to them and it is certainly under the influence of higher tiers of government.

We can therefore define local government as a political and administrative subdivision of central or Federal government established to administer the affairs of local communities and discharging roles assigned by the higher levels (tiers) of government.

Local Government Autonomy

Local Government autonomy can be described from different perspectives. According to Davey (1991) as cited in Adeyemo (2005), local government autonomy is primarily concerned with the questions of responsibilities, resources and discretion conferred on the local authorities. As such, discretion and responsibility is the core of local government autonomy. It presumes that local government must possess the power to take decisions independent of external control within the limits laid down by the laws. This means that there should be high measure of authority available for local government to exercise over critical areas necessary for her growth and development such as finance, personnel and elections (politics).

In similar vein, Anayochukwu and Ani (2021) put forward that local government autonomy loosely refers to the degree of freedom accorded the third tier of government concerning legal, administrative and financial independence within constitutional limits. This definition is very relevant to this discussion because it see local government autonomy as freedom or independence in clearly defined issues and areas like finance, personnel and elections (politics) from other level of governments. Local government autonomy means the separate existence of local government as a legal entity and freedom to enjoy self-governing status over its affairs and independence from domination and interference by other levels of government all within constitutional provisions and limits.

Wolman, Mc Manmon, Bell and Brunori (2008) in their study on “Comparing Local Government Autonomy Across States” in USA provided an expanded meaning of local government autonomy. Wolman et al (2008) define local government autonomy as a system of local government in which local government units have an important role to play in the economy and the intergovernmental system, have discretions in determining what they will do without undue constraint from higher level of government and have the means or capacity to do so. This definition is comprehensive and empirical because it examines local autonomy from three major sub-dimensions that are subject to empirical verification. These are (i) local government importance i.e where local government system is not only free to do what it wishes but those things it does must affect the state economy as well as playing important role in intergovernmental system (ii) local government discretion base on the ability of local government to engage in activities as its sees fit, free from constraints imposed by the state government and (iii) local government capacity which connotes broad range of attribute including resource sufficiency and stability, professional skills, management competence and quality of service delivery.

Based on the foregoing submissions, we can therefore define local government autonomy as the discretion and capacity of local government system to exercise authority in their assigned area of responsibilities such as finance, personnel and elections (politics) within constitutional limits and without interference from other tiers of government particularly the state government.

3. Theoretical framework

There is plethora of the theories that are used to explain the operations and existence of local government. According to Ola (1984) as cited in Adeyemo (2005), there is democratic participation theory, efficient-service theory and developmental theory or school of thought. The democratic school of thought explains that local governments exist and are created to encourage grassroots mobilization and participation in elections and decision making. The efficiency school of thought believes that local government is better

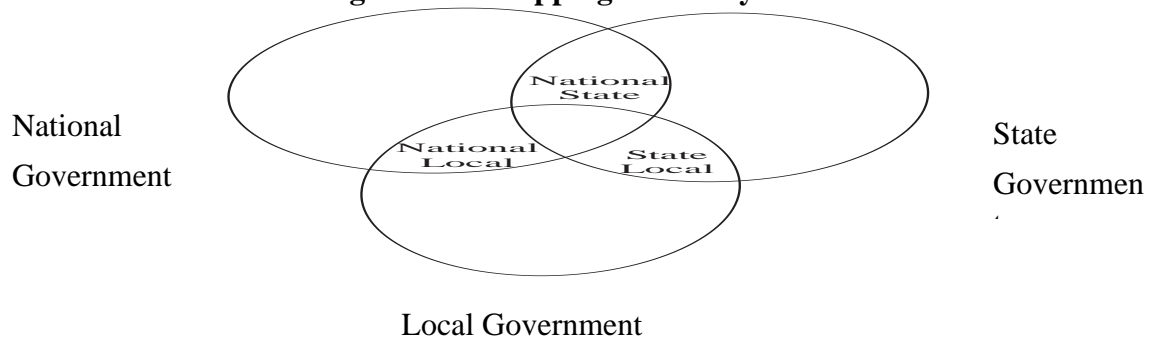
placed to deliver effective and efficient services and its success in providing services up to a standard measured by a national inspectorate or level of government should be the parameter of assessing the fulfillment of its mandate. The developmental school of thought sees local government as effective agent of a better life, an improved means of living socially and economically and means to a better share in the national wealth.

However, this paper mainly focuses on autonomy of local government and intends to explain contracting and relaxing factors of local government autonomy in relations to other tiers particularly the state government. This shifts the focus from general view of local government to a specific consideration of interactions and transactions between local government and other tiers of government, hence the need to explain and adopt intergovernmental relations model.

Wright (1988) identifies three different models of intergovernmental relations. These are: Coordinate or separate authority model, inclusive authority model and overlapping authority model. In Coordinate or separate authority model of intergovernmental relations, national and state governments are created by the constitution and their powers are derived there from; the local governments are created by the state. The power relations between the two coequal government units are distinctly separated. The inclusive authority model conveys the essential hierarchical nature of authority among the organs or units of government. Under this model, the constitution may or may not recognize and allocate powers to the levels of government.

The overlapping model has a kind of constitutional status where the constitution defines areas of autonomous actions by the respective jurisdiction (National, State and Local Levels). In respect to the nature of power relations, interactions among the three coequal levels of government i.e. the national, state and local government, their relations are governed by the constitution and each unit can defend its constitutional powers; hence, there is limited and dispersed power. In relation to authority pattern, the negotiation of the term of exchange or agreement is interlocking, interdependent, balance and bargaining as demonstrated below:

Fig. 1.3: Overlapping Authority Model.



Source: Eneanya (2015, p. 553)

In the overlapping model as presented in figure 1.3 above, the substantial areas of government operations involve National, State and Local officials simultaneously and there is a high degree of potential or actual independence indicating modest areas of autonomy. This model was envisaged under both 1979 and the 1999 Nigerian constitutions as amended. This paper adopts the content of this framework for analysis because under this political climate, local governments are placed on necessary legal grounds to operate and exercise autonomy in certain areas.

3.1 Origin and Evolution of Local Government in Nigeria

Nigeria practices Federal system of government with three tiers of government: the central also referred to as the (Federal government), the state and local government. Local government system has taken different forms from one period to the other in Nigeria. There is pre-colonial and colonial experience culminating in different traditional political system. Fajobi (2010) documented that there was indirect rule system whereby such government were being run through the traditional rulers, the Chief or the Warrant Chiefs.

Furthermore, Asaju (2010) corroborated the foregoing submissions when he asserted that the history of local government system in Nigeria could be traced back to the pre-colonial period when powerful Empires and Kingdoms existed in Nigeria such as: Oyo Empire, Nupe Kingdom and Igala Kingdoms, among others. There were smaller districts, wards, towns and villages which were subjected to the larger kingdoms. The advent of British colonial administration in Nigeria brought about a change in local government administration in which the method of leadership changed from the traditional to the British colonial government based on the introduction of indirect rule system.

The political and constitutional development in Nigeria which witnessed the introduction of Arthur Richard Constitution in 1946 divided Nigeria into three regions namely the North, East and West (Joel, 2013). The composition of the regions into three impacted on the local government system which operated as Native Authorities and each region decided to adopt its own type or form of local government system. All these forms of local authorities in different regions operated heterogeneously in forms and structures in Nigeria before the local government reforms of 1976. The provisions of the local government reforms of 1976 in Nigeria were reflected in subsequent Constitutional provisions such as the 1979, 1989 and the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Even though the constitution has been subjected to some amendments, the arrangement and operations of local government system in Nigeria after over two decades of return to democratic rule is premised on the provisions of the Nigeria Constitution of 1999 (as amended).

3.2 Operational Models of Local Government in Nigeria and the USA

Both Nigeria and the United States of America (USA) adopt and practice Federalism where each tier of government – Federal, state and local government is assigned responsibilities to discharge within constitutional limits. In Nigeria, the enduring feature of the local government reforms of 1976 that has been retained in subsequent Constitutional amendments up to the Fourth Republic is uniform structure of local government across different states of the Federations and FCT, Abuja. The composition and functions of local government in Nigeria are predicated on the 1999 Constitution (as amended) which marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria. The Constitution recognized local government as the third tier through democratic set up.

The executive and legislative councils are principally in charge of controlling the affairs of a local government. The executive body is made up of a Chairman, Vice Chairman who are elected by the people while the legislative body comprised the Councillors who are elected to represent each Ward which constitute a local government. The Chairman of a local government council who is directly elected by the people could be impeached by the Councillors if found wanted against the law. Similarly, a Councillor could be disciplined by the Council members or recalled by his or her Ward after certain legal constitutional requirements are fulfilled (Joel, 2021). It is pertinent to note here that the structure and model of local government operations across different states in Nigeria are uniform.

The Constitution and other extant laws ensure that local governments are subjected to the control of the state governments. For example, there is State Independent Electoral

Commission (SIEC) created by state government to handle electoral affairs at the local government; there is also Ministry of Local government and Chieftaincy Affairs created by most states to watch over the running of affairs at local government level in addition to Local Government Service Commission created by most states to guide the operations of civil servants at local government level. There is also creation of Financial Memoranda by the state governments to regulate and control financial conduct of local governments. The *modus operandi* of all these state government-created legal and institutional apparatuses may be different from state to state but their functions are basically the same with proclivity towards undermining local government autonomy.

As noted earlier on, the two countries practice Federalism but the operational structure of local government in the USA is radically different. Local government in the USA is subordinate to the state government and each state possesses legal and constitutional power to establish its own system of local government depending on history, experience and conditions. This makes the nomenclature, organization and functions of the units of local government in the USA to differ from state to state. Unlike the homogenous structural arrangement of local government in Nigeria, there is heterogeneous arrangement in the USA with the structure and operations of local government varying from one state to another as stipulated in the extant laws made by state governments. Okafor and Kalu (2023) noted that local governments are not recognized in the USA national laws, they are creation of state laws. In many states in the USA where local governments exist, the roles are usually restricted by state legislations even though, they are more often times; allowed to undertake activities, programs that will benefit the states. As a corollary, the local government units enjoy high degree of autonomy i.e they can recruit and manage their staff, generate sufficient revenue and conduct election (politics) in their own sphere with little or no interference of the Federal government (Joel, 2021).

The USA has the following units of local government: “County, City (municipality), Towns and township and Special district” (Laxmikanth 2011, p. 256). For the purpose of local government, each state of the Federal Republic of the USA is divided into a number of counties. Each county is further subdivided into a number of cities and towns or township. In addition, there are special districts created to render specific functions. A brief explanation of each of this unit is necessary at this junction.

County

A county is the largest unit of local government and serve as agency of the state government. The organization, powers and functions of these counties differ from state to state and from county to county. The county performs functions like law enforcement, administration of justice, provision of public utilities, etc. Each county is governed by a board which is made up of four to fifty members elected directly for a period of four years. It also elects its own Chairman. There also exist at the county level, a large number of officials such as sheriff, clerk, coroner, attorney, auditor, judge etc. These officials are elected directly by the people, usually for a term of two years and they exercise administrative powers independent of the board.

City (Municipality)

A city is a unit of urban local self – government and is incorporated as a municipality. It is equivalent of British borough. It has a charter, which is a fundamental law which defines its organization, power and functions. The charter is granted to a city by the state legislature either under a special Act or under general laws. A city can frame its own Charter under the Municipal home rule. Base on the locale of power, city governments are classified into three forms:

The Mayor-Council Plan: Under this arrangement, the executive and legislative powers are shared between the Mayor and City Council members respectively who are elected by the electorate independently. This is the oldest and most popular form of local government in the USA.

The Commission Plan: In this form of city government, legislative and executive power is vested in a Commission whose members are elected by the people for a fixed period of time. The Commission members could appoint a Mayor as a ceremonial head with no executive power.

The City Manager Plan: In this form, there is a Council consisting of five to seven members who are directly elected for a period of two to four years. Legislative functions are performed by Council members. But they could elect a Mayor presiding over the Council as ceremonial head. The Council appoints a professional administrator called the City Manager to act as the Chief Administrator of the city government. He acts as the agent of the Council in carrying out its ordinances and policies.

Town and Township

Town and township are the sub-divisions of counties. They are the principal units of local government in rural and urban areas. There exists a governing body called Town Meeting which consists of eligible voters of the town. It has an elected Board of chosen men and officials that administer it. The governing body of the township is board of supervisors or Board of Trustees.

Special Districts

It is a unit of local government established to provide one particular service. It is a machinery to carry out a specific function across the jurisdiction of other local units. Special district (or single purpose district) is created for education, sanitation, fire protection, etc. They are created as quasi-municipal organizations under the state law with the consent of the people in districts (Laxmikanth, 2011).

4. Discussions

This section discusses the level of autonomy of local government over finance, personnel and politics (elections) in Nigeria. The focus on these three major parameters is justified by the fact that they constitute the pillars around which effective administration of local government and exercise of autonomy revolves. Similarly, these were summed up as areas where political, administrative and fiscal autonomy of local governments are undermined in Nigeria (Okorie, Obasi, Nwosu, Chukwu, Otu and Ngwuta, 2023).

Finance plays pivotal role in the administration of local government. That is why Anayo- Chukwu and Ani (2021) submitted that the ability of the local government to perform their constitutionally assigned functions depends on the funds available to them. However, there are constitutional, institutional and legal frameworks that are in operations which handicaps financial freedom of local governments in Nigeria. It is necessary to note that financial management at local government levels are carried out within the framework of Financial Memoranda (FM). Financial memoranda (FM) are a compendium of rules regulations, procedure and principles which is articulated and adopted to guide all the financial and administrative work of local government within a state. Ojobo (2011) noted that financial memoranda in operations in all states in Nigerian Federation are similar and they perform roles like defining the precise duties and responsibilities of the local government, prescribing certain financial organizational arrangements, clarifying the accounting objectives and accounting principles to be followed as well as stating the procedure and arrangements for internal audit of the accounts of the local governments and other financial regulatory functions. The design and operation of financial memoranda is

characterized with some limitations. It served as a mere controlling instrument instead of serving as a broad base tool for the management and control of local government finances for the effective mobilization, allocation and utilization of financial resources (Ojobo, 2011).

Besides financial memoranda, local government autonomy is restrained financially through the constitution. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) empowers the state to scrutinize and approve local government budgets and expenditure through the State Houses of Assembly; the states here exercise arbitrary and undue control over local government finances (Asaju, 2010). This is done in multiple ways, for instance it has power to grant approval to loan requests or deny it. This is in addition to the creation of the office of an Auditor-General for the local governments of a state, who should be appointed by the Governor of the state, to audit annually the accounts of the local government and reports thereof should be laid before the House of Assembly of the state. This restricts the autonomy of the local government in the area of finance in a debilitating manner.

No thanks to State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) in undermining the financial autonomy of local government in Nigeria. The SJLGA is a constitutional provision as consolidated in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). The section 162 (5) of the constitution among other things stated that: “the amount standing to the credit of local government councils in the Federal account shall also be allocated to the state for the benefit of their local government councils on such terms and in such manners as may be prescribed by the National Assembly.” It further stated that: Each state shall maintain a specific account to be called “State Joint Local Government Account” into which shall be paid all allocations to the local government councils of the state from the federal account and from the government of the state” (Section 162 (6), 1999 Constitution (as amended). This section of the constitution provided the basis for the establishment and operations of State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA) (Joel, 2021).

In spite of all the argument canvassed for the introduction of SJLGA, its adverse effects on the financial buoyancy of local government cannot be under estimated. The SJLGA has provided a negative opportunity for state governments to illegally deduct from statutory allocation of the local government. This implies that the third tier of government hardly gets the correct value of their entitlements or allocation from the state government thereby making them to permanently be short changed.

Besides the illegal deductions is deliberate delay in the release of the statutory allocation of the LGs by the state governments. Since local government allocation comes through the state based on the joint account system, LG statutory entitlements are not released to them as and when due and this negative practice hamstring the financial viability of local governments. Diversion of LGs statutory allocations by the state government has also been a negative fallout of SJLGA on the financial freedom of LGs. Bello (2018) revealed that the fund for the joint account were used by some state governments to fund the creation of additional local government or Local Development Areas (LDAs) as is referred to in some states and also fund electioneering. In addition, the law guiding the operations of SJLGA stipulated that state governments should always contribute 10% of their internally generated revenue to the fund for sharing. In reality states are reluctant to contribute this percentage to the fund and this continues to limit the financial flow to the local governments. The foregoing explanations point to the fact that certain constitutional provisions through the apparatus of the state governments have succeeded in pauperizing and undermining the autonomy of the local government as tier of government.

Autonomy Over Personnel

The autonomy of local government over its personnel in Nigeria is huge claim as more often than not, it is the state government through various machineries that control and direct the personnel affairs of the local government level. This means that local governments have workforce that they have minimal or no control over. The local government service commission as a parastatal of state government monitors and control the affairs of local government personnel through:

- (i) Setting up general and uniform guidelines for appointments, promotion and discipline;
- (ii) Overseeing the activities of each local government to ensure that guidelines are strictly and uniformly adhered to, and
- (iii) Serve as a review body for all petitions from local governments in respect of appointments, promotions and discipline.

The substance of these provisions is that through the establishment of the ministry for local government and chieftaincy affairs in most states of the Nigerian Federation, the recruitment, promotion, posting and discipline of local government staff especially the senior officials is perfected. This makes most local government executive councils not to have command and control of their staff. The resultant effect is that critical personnel matters regarding recruitment, promotions, discipline of staff are subjected to patronage and political connections rather than merits and this compromises effective performance and service delivery at local government level.

Autonomy over election (politics)

Control by local government over its political affairs is necessary if it must fulfill its mandate. But local government is far from enjoying appreciable autonomy in this regard. To start with, local government has little or no control over the tenure of its elected officials nor the institutions that conduct the elections. For instance, Asaju (2010) acknowledged the undermining status of local government in political/electoral affairs when he explains that Section 7(6) of the 1999 constitution (as amended) provides for a democratically elected local government council. While the constitution provides for four year tenure for federal and state political office holders, it was silent on the tenure of the local government political office holders. Furthermore, Idoko and Obidimma (2020) noted that the Constitution empowers State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) to conduct elections into the local government councils; whereas, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is obliged to compile the voters register for purposes of such elections on the other hand. This excludes local governments in Nigeria from exercising primary control over their political affairs.

Besides the intergovernmental conflictual posture of these constitutional provisions is the striking reality that the conduct of political affairs at local government level is entrusted into the hands of political institutions that are exogenous, that is outside the jurisdiction of the local government. This makes LGs subject and subservient to external political authorities.

Additionally, in terms of election and political participation at the grassroots level, Kabir (2012) captured it all, the helplessness of LGs in determining their political affairs when he submitted that the race to run Nigeria's local government elective position represents politics at its terrible stance where people may vote but the result appear in most cases to be a foregone conclusions as they are mostly manipulated by state machineries and personalities to favor state executives. These practices often aid and abet elections of leaders that are accountable to personalities rather than electorate and this often result in

poor service delivery and under performance of local government institutions in implementing development projects.

Based on the above discussion, it can be noted that there is autonomy-deficit over control of finance, personnel and conduct of elections (politics) in Nigeria. It is also imperative to note that even where there is local autonomy, it exist in degree and vary from one local government to another like the case of USA (Wolman et al, 2008). In the USA the counties as well as towns and township are more autonomous. Local government chairmen, and township and Mayor that administers municipality have complete control over their personnel and finances including the preparation of budget and handling of projects at their jurisdictions. Okorie and Kalu (2023) summed it well when they noted that local government system in the USA is structured to reflect the dynamic sovereignty of the masses. In other words, counties serves as outlet of meeting needs, realizing aspirations of states and National Governments; hence the need to draw lessons from USA's experience.

Lessons from USA Approach

To improve local government autonomy in Nigeria the following lessons can be drawn based on differential pattern of operation of local governments as discussed:

Local governments in Nigeria should be encouraged through dialogue and constitutional amendment to adopt different structure within the broad Federal constitution as against the uniform structure being adopted presently across the country. The constitutional amendment should focus on drastic reduction of state governments' power and control over local governments. While the criteria for adoption of uniform structure should be based on history, experience and the needs of the area. This is imperative because the needs of the local governments that are situated around the metropolitan state capitals are different from those at the interior boundary of the state. Similarly, there is need to encourage the adoption of different administrative set up that encourages power sharing and equity between the executive and the legislature depending on the effectiveness and economy of such administrative set up. In this regard, there is Mayor council plan, the Commission plan as well as city Manager plan. The restriction to Chairman-Councillors arrangement in Nigeria may not be suitable to meet developmental needs of all the local governments.

There should be more democratization of key posts of local government levels. That is, the election should not be limited to only Chairman and Councillors but also other key posts such as treasurer, secretary and Director of Personnel at local government level. This should reflect as obtained in USA counties where beside the Chairman all other Board members of the counties are elected. In Nigeria, state governments should not handpick and place those officials at local government level but rather they should emerge through elections to make them more loyal and accountable to the people.

The tenure of local government officials should be clearly stipulated in the constitution and not to be left at the discretion of the state governments. This is to ensure stability in policy implementation as well as smooth transition that discourages appointment of Caretaker Committee or Sole Administrator to run the affairs of local government who may not be accountable to the electorate.

There should also be entrenchment of laws in the Federal constitution that commit local governments to generate certain percentage of revenue from their areas to strengthen the capacity base of local government to formulate and implement programmes within their sphere independently. This will reduce over dependence of local government on other tiers of government so as not to compromise their autonomy. All these lessons can be smoothly implemented in Nigeria through Constitutional amendments and modification of extant laws.

5. Conclusion

Enhancing local, government autonomy as advocated in this paper should not be misconstrued as making local government a sovereign entity. This is because the states and Federal government still retains power and control over local government in terms of its creation and control. Local government as sub-national government is not sovereign. But relative autonomy that enables local government to operate without interference in such a way that it can discharge services effectively and efficiently while pursuing development goals is realizable. This can be enjoyed through constitutional amendment that emphasizes on heterogeneous organization and operation of Local Government as obtainable in the USA.

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