



## Commodification of Nigeria Democratic Process and its Implications for National Development

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### Abstract

Nigeria political culture is not static but dynamic as democracy is becoming more embedded and entrenched in Africa. The competitive nature of Nigeria politics and the economic benefits that accompanied the political offices has made the competition among different political parties and candidates more intense, which in turn has negatively impacted the political processes by monetizing almost all political activities, thereby commoditizing the democratic process. The study analyzed the commodification of Nigeria democratic process and factors that propel this practice. The paper adopted Social Exchange Theory to provide theoretical insight for the analysis. For the methodology, the paper adopted qualitative method to elicit data. The paper argued that political parties, candidates, political strategist, traditional leaders, religious leaders, voters and political contractors are all engaged in one of monetary transactions or the other to support, vote and elect a candidate or support a party based on the money they received from such deals. The study concludes that if these obnoxious practices are not halted it will create mediocre, incompetent and ill prepare leaders who will have consequential effects on national development.

**Keyword:** Democracy, Commodification, Politics and Merchandizers

### Introduction

Commodification is a concept used to refers to the transformation of things such as goods, services, ideas, nature, personal information, people or animals into objects of trade or commodities (Maloney, 2020; Riji, 2012). Since the returned of Nigeria to democratic dispensation from long military rule, politicians and political parties are gradually turning the political affairs of the country to a commodity like activities of buying and selling of votes, candidates, crowds and parties endorsements through monetary and non-monetary exchange. This transformation is widely spread in Nigeria contemporary political space, especially during electioneering periods as candidates makes alignments and realignments, negotiations and renegotiations with political gladiators, political merchants and the electorates which the acclaimed political powers and mandates belongs to them to merchandize their interests and political aspirations through political merchandizers like political parties, parties delegates, party leadership, opinion leaders, traditional leaders (Aliyu, 2023), and now by extension religious leaders from both Christianity and Islamic faiths, who some are now engaged in hawking candidates of a given political party over the other parties who social exchange has not been established with them or are not satisfy with the perceived benefits that will emanate from them.



This trend is becoming more institutionalized in the contemporary Nigeria political culture. Marx claimed that everything would eventually be commodified. ‘the things which until then had been communicated, but never exchanged, given, but never exchanged, given but never sold, acquired, but never bought –virtues, love, conscience all at least enter into commerce (Leopold, 2015). This shows that things like voting for candidates seeking of elective positions are no longer only based on electorates’ freewill but inducement of conscience and choices of people as dictated by the influences of monies and other primordial sentiments that are becoming dominant factors in influencing social action in Nigeria public space. Generally, the political preference for candidate and political party are usually influence in some context by inducing the consciences of the people by the candidate himself/ herself and/or political merchandizers who influences the consciences and choices of some electorates to act based on their whims and caprices by selling their candidates to them through tangible commodities like money, rice, spaghetti, noodles and other items given by politicians ,party officials or their agents to buy some electorates votes or intangible items like propaganda, religion or ethnic sentiments which are given impetus to one candidates/party over others where such non-commodity inducement work in an election. It is on this background that this paper set to achieve the following objectives: to analyze the role of political parties in promoting the commodification of Nigeria democratic space; to examine the social dynamics of political endorsement in Nigerian democratic political arena and to profile those engaged in political merchandizing in Nigeria democratic space.

## **The Economy of Political Parties in Nigeria Democratic Space**

The position and roles of political parties in democratic processes cannot be over emphasized. This is the bedrock of democratic processes where those interested in elected political offices start their journey to state, national and even international assignments. Ayeni (2019) sees political party as being the soul of every democratic governance and process because of the roles it plays in leadership selection and/or recruitment for the party to effectively carried out it function. To do these activities, the parties will be in dear need of financial and non-financial resources to carryout it activities, and sometimes these monies are sought out legally (party levies, sale of forms, donations from party men) or illegally by the party leadership, this why Omorunmola (2017) opined that money is a critical factor for political party parties to run their operations during and after elections, so financiers are needed even before the elections proper as their party expenses need to be carter for. This led to the emergence of party financiers who fund the affairs of the political party, and as such have a very big stake at the party. This kind of financing usually set stage for trading activities in the party, especially if the party has attained national prominence and has become force to reckon with as a major political player in a given political system. The leadership of the party and the financiers may not find common ground for smooth sailing sometimes. For instance, this reality of the party leadership fight with party financiers was seen between the then governor Nyeson Wike of rivers state and the leadership of his political party Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).



Political financiers often see politics as an investment and ensure that they reaped huge return from their investment (Ayeni,2019) that is why they can finance party affairs and sponsor their party to stand on strong footing especially now that they are in opposition against their original position of been the ruling party. He accused the then party chairman of embezzling party money at the expense of party progress and not upholding to the political zoning arrangement of the party, this was so because he has seen himself as one of the major financiers of his political party. So financiers do not only sponsor political party but they also sponsor candidates for their own ulterior motives. The vicious cycle of political investment tends to cut short if there are breach of trust between financiers and candidates, they are financing if eventually the candidate gets elected. Some of these parties' financiers are rewarded with ministerial positions, ambassadorial appointments, given of employment slots for their people and land/houses in choice locations, these kinds of compensation are seen even at state and local government level (Adamu, 2022).

Another area of trading glaring at party level is the issue of party delegate and party primaries election. Most political parties in Nigeria tend to adopt the use of indirect primaries to elected their party representative in general elections. This method has succeeded in creating a business avenue for some of the delegates of major political parties who are chosen by their party to form Electoral College in other to elect party flag bearers in general elections. Most of these delegates that are chosen by their party to elect one among the contestants in the party, usually trade their votes to the highest bidder especially during governorship and presidential primaries elections (Adamu,2022). Delegates were seen with millions of naira and at times even with dollars as proceeds for their participation in the primary's elections. This practice is making our politicians to spend too much on election and once they assumed offices our national development suffers it, as they will be struggling to recover far beyond their so-called investment rather than hitting the ground running for dividends of democracy for citizenry and drive for national development.

Furthermore, party loyalty reward syndrome. The style of Nigeria politics is compensation to party loyalists, party financiers and co-contenders in some cases. Sometimes these categories are usually compensated in monetary times and this account for why some party faithful are loyal to the party at all costs while others are given non-monetary rewards like political positions, appointments, employment opportunities and even locating of projects in their communities for their sake. This approach tends to keep widening the commodification of Nigeria democratic process and enhances mass mobilization of the electorates to the benefits of the candidate and/or a particular political party.

## **The Trading of Political Endorsement in Nigeria and its Implication for Democratic Processes**

One of the commonest phenomena during electioneering season in Nigeria is the endorsement syndrome. Political endorsement is a public declaration of one's personal or groups support of a candidate for elected political office (Ansolabere, Lessem & Sydeer,2006). This practice is fast becoming an established norms and part and parcel of Nigeria political culture which is seeing as a common style of politicking among political jobbers especially for the offices





of the governors and president in a democratic country like Nigeria. This action of endorsement is mirrored from America democracy and other developed countries where every group endorses a candidate based on its interest with also backing the endorsement with funding as well as ensuring that the candidate get votes of their members (Ayantoye,2022). Here the endorsers spend for the endorsed candidates to emerge as winner by voting for him/her and also influencing others to do so. For instance, during last America presidential election between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, there was a high-profile political endorsement by different groups and the supporters of each party and candidates, this has widened the political divides between the republicans and the democrats. This strategy was also replicated in Nigeria during the just recently concluded general elections, especially presidential election where each of these political parties; PDP, APC, LP and NNPP were endorsed by different groups and different opinion leaders in Nigeria. Here, the endorsements were chiefly induced by monetary and non-monetary factors unlike the American type that was mainly induced by party loyalty rather than votes buying and votes selling syndrome.

Nigerian politicians usually seek political endorsement from different endorsers both locally and internationally. Local political endorsers in Nigeria democratic space are religious leader, traditional leader, pressure groups and civil society's organizations that sometimes used their good-will to market a candidate or particular political party above others. Nigeria is now amongst one of the most religious polarized countries in the world, some religious leaders have fully submerged themselves into political activities either in covert or overt manner. Religion has been a dominant factor in Nigeria politics especially in this post-independence era (Umeanolue,2020). It has been a potent tool that is being utilize by politicians, political party and political agents to canvass for votes for their party's candidates. According to Adamo (2018) religion has had an increasing influence on the practice of Nigeria elections from pre-colonial period to the present but with the present day becoming more glaring. In this just concluded 2023 general election in Nigeria, politicians induced some religious leaders to use their noble and revered religious personality and/or bodies to directly or indirectly endorse a candidate or a political party and mobilize support for the candidate and party against their opponents. The religious leaders from the two most dominant religions (Christianity and Islam) in Nigeria were alleged to have collected millions from politicians with the promised to solicit for massive support for them. This reality was accentuated by the political calculations of APC to ride on Muslim-Muslim ticket at National level and even at some states level. Many religious leaders in print and social media took to the campaign of calumny against each other, but it was alleged by some Islamic cleric that some religious leaders were bribed with ten million naira each to propel this agenda that is fast tearing and polarizing the masses into two broad camps with perceived antagonistic relation, thereby creating mutual distrust which is hampering our developmental stride as a nation.

Another place of political endorsements is the traditional rulers, especially in African countries where most traditional rulers still possess high level of relevance and respect among their followers and some people outside their domains who see them as symbol of authority and admiration. By modern constitutional arrangements they are not willed political powers but



advisory role which in most cases they gone out of their boxes and engage in political activities directly or indirectly. The role of traditional rulers in African was aptly described by Igwubor (2020) the traditional rulers are the leaders of the people and custodian of the peoples' culture and tradition and these made them to be highly respected and revered by the people within and outside their domain. He further stressed that, this is so, because they are seen as intermediaries between the people and the gods and the ancestors, and such, cannot be disobeyed or disrespected. All these are gradually changing but they are still relevant to contemporary politics, political parties and politicians that ride on their shoulders to clinch political power. Because of their wide range of influences, they are dragged into politics by endorsing candidates that come to them during electioneering campaigns. Like the first-class traditional rulers in Nigeria, especially in Northern Nigeria, governorship aspirants and presidential candidates usually visit the Emirs for public endorsements and solicit their support for their bidding over their opponents. It was alleged by some scholars that this endorsement is usually in monetary exchange to those traditional rulers who in turn direct their subjects and subordinate chiefs under them to work for the interest of one candidate or the party they support at the expense of other parties and their candidates. Most traditional rulers sometimes opened their doors for prospective candidates to come and pay homage to them while they in turn received gifts (both monetary and non-monetary).

### **Vote Buying and Vote Selling in Nigeria Contemporary Democratic Political Space**

The concept votes buying is defined different by different scholars. According to Danjibo and Oladddeji (2007) define vote-buying as a gift or gratuity bestowed for the purpose of influencing the action or conduct of receiver; especially money or any valuable consideration given or promised for the betrayal of a trust or the corrupt performance of an allotted duty, as to a voter. Also, Bello-Imam (2007) sees vote-buying as a form of bribery consisting of money or other rewards for voting as directed. Obiora, Nwabuoku, Jericho & Esavwed (2023) quoted Sha who defines vote-buying as “any form of persuasion in which financial gain is suggested by one person to another with the intention of influencing a person’s vote. All the above definitions see it as an inducement that influences the conscience of a voter to act otherwise. Most scholarly work do not focus on vote sellers (electorates and political merchandizers) who positioned themselves to be induce both financially and materially for the sake of the power of their vote casts. These social realities are not peculiar recurring catastrophe to Nigerian alone as some countries within and without African continents are guilty of this aberration and violation to their national electoral laws. Buyers of votes (includes; candidates, political parties, politicians, and party agents) and vote sellers (includes; electorates, traditional rulers, religious rulers, opinion leaders) these two broads parties always engage in trading during political parties’ primaries, electioneering campaigns, days scheduled for elections and even at the points of result collations. Obiora, Nwabuoku, Jericho & Esavwed (2023) summited that vote-buying is very prevalent in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Sao Tome Principe, Rwanda, Equatorial Guinea, Burundi, Uganda, Liberia, Togo, Sierra Leone, Democratic republic of Congo, and Tanzania. All these are to justify that this phenomenon is an epidemic in many democratic nations in Africa. For instance, during the just concluded 2023 general elections



in Nigeria, there was accusation and counter accusation among political parties and candidates on votes buying. Some candidates sell their votes to a candidate through his/her agent or party agents at #1000, #2000 and above, some sold their votes by collecting spaghetti and #2000 from party agents. This was done across some polling units in Nigeria. These narratives dominated the national media during the elections, collation and announcement periods.

## Rented Crowd Trading Syndrome

Political engagements are activities that are crowds' centre. From pre-election, on-election and post-election activities crowds are needed and are seen as symbol of victory. Historically, crowd's mobilisation was not monetary induce activities, as citizens willingly volunteer their presence to cheer and show support to candidates and parties of their interests and this is further supported by traditional and sometimes religious institutions who galvanize support for their preferred candidates or party but this reality is fast fading away, as citizens get disenchanted and grow the culture of political apathy. Presently, crowds' mobilisations are turning to an economic venture where crowds are mobilizing by money and/or some commodities through some agents. Crowds are mobilizing for political rallies, party convention and campaigns through arrangements for monetary payments to those crowds that availed themselves for the aforementioned political activities.

## Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative methods of data collection using KII to elicit data from the selected respondents. Purposive method of sampling was used to select key informants like political parties' officials, party delegates, traditional rulers, religion leaders, candidates. Others relevant stakeholders for this study are political opinion leaders, political aspirants, elected politicians, unelected politicians and leaders of some recognized electorates associations. The reason for choice these respondents are because they are all involved in one form of political activities on the other. Forty key informants were interviewed, the data were coded and analysed using thematic method.

## Theoretical Framework

The current social exchange theory is a multi-disciplinary approach used to explain social behaviour. The exchange theory was first developed by the sociologist George Homas, who wrote about it in the year 1958 in an essay titled "Social Behavior as Exchange." Later, sociologists Peter Blau and Richard Emerson further developed the theory to reflect wider perspective (Crossman, 2020). Several scholars have expanded social exchange theory to describe power, social cohesion, and risk and uncertainty.

Social exchange theory is a model for interpreting society as a series of interactions between people that are based on estimates of rewards and punishments. According to this view, our interactions are determined by the rewards or punishments that we expect to receive from others, which we evaluate using a cost-benefit analysis model (whether consciously or subconsciously). Central to the social exchange theory is the idea that an interaction that elicits





approval from another person is more likely to be repeated than an interaction that elicits disapproval. We can thus predict whether a particular interaction will be repeated by calculating the degree of reward (approval) or punishment (disapproval) resulting from interaction. If the reward for an interaction exceeds the punishment, then the interaction is likely to occur or continue. Rewards can come in many forms: social recognition, money, gifts, and even subtle everyday gestures like smile, nod, or pat on the back on one hand while punishments also come in many forms, from extremes like public humiliation, beating, or execution, to subtle gestures like a raised eyebrow or a frown on the other hand. In terms of applicability of this theory to explain this paper, there are many economic actors in the social exchange relationships in democratic political system arrangements like political party members, party leadership, candidates, political financiers, party supporters, religious organizations, religious leaders, traditional leaders, opinion moulders among others. All these political endorsers are applying economic principles when evaluating relationships, either consciously or unconsciously. All these endorsers are guided by the anticipated benefits of making money for themselves from the politicians, candidates that are anxiously working to win elections, and also getting juicy political appointments in reward of their sacrifices for their labour to the party and the candidates that have emerged as winners and are willing political power while the electorate collects money and other items in exchange of their votes and other promises unleash by the aspirants.

## Data Presentation and Discussion of Major Findings:

### The role of political parties in promoting the commodification of Nigeria democratic space

Scholars like (Omorunmola, 2017 and Ayeni, 2019) advanced certain reasons engaged in use of money by political parties to induced electorates and voting outcomes in an election due to high competitiveness of political positions in Nigeria and the huge economy benefits that winners will get after been elected. The findings of this research also showed many more reasons for political parties using money and other commodities to gain political power. For instance, one of the APC party officials argued thus:

Nigeria politics has truly turned to the game of buying and selling of invisible commodities as everything connected to politics you need money to do them. Political aspirants, party financiers and party members in government always provide money for us to carry out our activities, since INEC has tactically stopped financing political parties. We pay voters to support us; we pay some religious leaders of both Christianity and Islam to campaign for us, support our party and gather support of their followers to vote for our candidates so as for us to win elections (R15).

Another informant, PDP political aspirant said

Politics in Africa is totally monetized right from selling of just ordinary paper called form. We buy forms in millions, we do consultation with money because we must pay those loyalists that move around with us, we must drop money to influential people and organizations we visited and we must buy delegates with money, bikes



and even cars to some party officials just to win primary election. So, we have pre-elections expenses, elections expenses and post-election expenses. Even now that I did not win in the just concluded election, I'm still spending money to voters, party officials a, religious and traditional leaders just to be relevant for the next election (R6).

Also, another informant, an Islamic cleric submitted that

Truly some of us that are influential do received money from different aspirants that come to us to help them galvanize support, so we are like political contractors to them, we will preach sometimes directly or indirectly to favour a candidate or party. After the election some still come back to us or invite us for prayers but the true essence is to reward us for job well done in monetary terms and in kind sometimes" (R24).

The findings of this study are in line with works of Obiora, Nwabuoku, Jericho & Esavwed (2023) that submitted that money is been used to buy influential people who in turn will influence others to vote for their anointed party and candidates and also, Igwubor (2020) traditional leaders are seen as spiritual leaders and people who have the interest of their communities at hand, so once they endorse a person their followers support the person. So parties struggle to win some prominent traditional leaders to their favours.

On a contrary, one of the informants argued that sometimes politicians do not give us money but they will publicize lies against us and tarnish our revered reputation. He added: Sometimes politicians will asked us to support them and help them to win the election, the politicians will publicly pronounced the gift of money or any items to us but will not deliver the money nor the promised items, when you call to ask, they will tell you that they have given the money to someone to give you but in actual truth, they do not released a dime (P21).

### **The Social Dynamics of Political Endorsement in Nigerian Democratic Political Arena**

There is no gainsaying that political endorsement is one of the most important aspects of Nigeria political campaign strategy that increases politicians hope during electioneering period. A good number of the informants interviewed agreed that political endorsement played a significant role in commoditization of Nigeria democratic political space using different methods. One of the traditional leaders argued as follows:

Politicians usually used people that are much closer to use to approached us and book appointments with us on their behalf and solicit that we endorse them. In doing so, monies exchanged different hands but only a token might reach us but people may not believe us (R1).

Another informant, a religious leader who has severally endorsed politicians corroborated the earlier submission by saying:

There are people that are called stakeholders in every affair of life, here in the north we are stake holders in almost everything concerning our people. So, politicians, party officials and candidates do come to us for endorsement. One irony of things





that usually happens is that any party or candidates that comes to us they will come with their media team, as soon as we exchanged pleasantries and they have given us something, the next thing we will see in social and print medias is that we have endorsed a candidate even if we have not truly done that but that's a strategy, they used to convince electorates and scared their opponents (R18).

Another informant who described himself as a political strategist said thus:

Politics is now business and as such there must be buyer, sellers and commodity to trade (here referred to as the votes). We serve as bridge or link between politicians and the people especially stake holders and political associations. We sometimes approach politicians and tell him/her that we have link with high profile traditional, religious, and opinion leaders and we can arrange the meetings of both parties while in turn we visit those intended individuals and inform them that so so so and so so... aspirant wants to meet with them and this often make them feel important and open their arms to embrace the visit.

Furthermore, once we arranged the meeting we are rewarded in cash and in kind as the case may be. He further stressed that:

So, we are private political contractors, people from different political parties come to us. We arranged the meetings of politicians with influential stakeholders, once the meeting succeeds with one stake holder, rivalry parties start looking for us, especially those who are willing to meet the people that the other camp had earlier met, they sometimes approach us or we approach them and tell them that we have link to see whosoever that they want to see to endorse them. By doing so we are making money and fame for our political relevance (R29). This agrees with the submission of Titus& Abdullahi (2023) that there is emergence of political contractors in Nigeria democratic arrangements, they have links and wide range of influence and politicians do connect to them for opportunity of winning. Furthermore, Aliyu (2023) corroborated the findings by submitting that “stakeholdership” in politics is a means of making money, creating relevance and becoming more connected.

### **Profile of those engaged in political merchandizing in Nigeria democratic space**

Political processes involved lots of stakeholders that mar or make candidates and parties to sail to victory there are different political merchandizers that are coming on-board as our democracy is becoming more entrenched. One the elected politician argues that:

In political mapping, calculations and strategy many people are involved. We fondly called some of them political king makers. To win election you must spread tentacles by buying prominent religious leaders (both Muslims and Christians), traditional rulers, political associations, trade unions and markets officials and any relevant personality that political strategists will recommend for you to meet. All these have played pivotal role for our victories, we spent a lot of monies to them to get their



support. Some even engaged in serious negotiations of what we will give them and what they will benefit if we eventually won.

Further, he stressed that “even after victory you must continue spending for them, gifting them items like land, job slot, house, bike, cars, food items and seat for pilgrimage (especially among the muslim ummah) (R28)”. Another informant, an aspirant that lost the last election submitted that:

As three terms winner of elections in my constituencies I can tell you we have numerous political merchandizers both the ones you assigned and those you did not but all are working for recognition and compensation. We have assigned merchandizers that we give money to meet different people and stake holders and media to keep spreading our names to mobilize for support while others will use their monies to print banners, T-shirts, caps, cups and other souvenir for us until we notice them. Some religious leaders will be preaching and luring people to our favour and our supporters will bring the video or voice notes to us and we compensate the speakers for good job. So politics is now a wide range of business for many people, just know what to do to make money once the season comes sir (R32).

This study corroborated the findings of Titus and Abdullahi (2023) which argued that many people become political merchandizers with or without official approval from candidate or party, they spent their monies to do posters, T-shirts, caps and other souvenirs that promote the popularity of a candidates, some of them are very luck as they are highly rewarded by the candidate and the party should they win election while others are even ignored after the huge spending. Furthermore, the findings of this study corroborated with Aliyu (2023) political middlemen are increasingly becoming many, relevant and indispensable; they also make candidates, especially new politicians that just come on-board to see them as means to an end. As election year draws nearer you see many political associations like vanguard of democracy, catalyst of democracy, protectors of the people etc, all these are created for money marking, as soon as elections are over, you will not hear them.

### **Conclusion**

Globally, one area of great concern in a democratic state is the issue of election. In Nigeria, almost all aspect of political activities has been monetized by both the voters and candidates as vote buying and selling is becoming ubiquitous, new entrants into political activities that are seeing it as money making venture are on the increase in each election cycle period. Findings from this study showed that the expedition for money making is permeating the political arena in Nigeria which in turn is affecting quality of governance and pace of national development. Furthermore, the study revealed that there are open and hidden political merchants that are contributing to the commoditization of Nigeria democratic space which is affecting our national development in Nigeria.



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