

Godfathers, Godsons, and the Limits of Political Succession: An Analysis of Gubernatorial Transitions in Ebonyi State, 2007–2023

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Abstract— The politics of gubernatorial succession in Nigeria has been profoundly shaped by the phenomenon of godfatherism, in which outgoing governors exercise decisive influence over the selection of their successors. Ebonyi State, created in 1996 in southeastern Nigeria, provides a particularly instructive case study of this dynamic. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, the state has experienced three gubernatorial transitions, each marked by the active involvement of the incumbent in determining who would follow him. Martin Elechi, governor from 2007 to 2015, anointed David Umahi as his successor. Umahi, in turn, selected Francis Nwifuru to succeed him in 2023. This article traces the dynamics of these transitions, analysing the mechanisms through which outgoing governors have ensured the election of their chosen successors and the consequences of this pattern for democratic governance. Drawing on elite interviews, media archives, and electoral data, the study argues that the godfather model of succession, while effective in the short term, contains inherent instabilities. The interests of godfathers and godsons diverge once the successor assumes office, generating conflicts that have shaped Ebonyi's political landscape. The article contributes to the literature on political succession, patron-client politics, and democratic consolidation in Africa by demonstrating that godfather politics is not a stable equilibrium but a contested and evolving phenomenon.

Keywords: godfather politics; political succession; Ebonyi State; gubernatorial transitions; Nigerian politics.

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2015, David Umahi was sworn in as the third civilian governor of Ebonyi State. The event was the culmination of a carefully managed succession process in which the outgoing governor, Martin Elechi, had played the decisive role. Umahi had served as Elechi's deputy for four years and had been the governor's preferred candidate for the succession. With Elechi's backing, Umahi secured the nomination of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and won the general election. The transition appeared seamless, a model of orderly political succession in a country where such transitions are often contested and occasionally violent.

Eight years later, in May 2023, Umahi handed over power to his own chosen successor, Francis Nwifuru, who had served as Speaker of the Ebonyi State House of Assembly. Once again, the incumbent had selected the successor. Once again, the party machinery and state resources had been mobilised to ensure the chosen candidate's victory. The pattern that Elechi had established was replicated by the man he had elevated.

This article examines the dynamics of gubernatorial succession in Ebonyi State, focusing on the transitions of 2015 and 2023. It asks three interrelated questions. First, what mechanisms do outgoing governors deploy to ensure the election of their chosen successors? Second, what are the consequences of this pattern of succession for democratic governance, particularly for the accountability of elected officials to the electorate? Third, how stable is the godfather-godson relationship once the successor assumes office? The central argument is that the godfather model of political succession, while effective in securing orderly transitions of power, is inherently unstable. The interests of godfathers and godsons diverge once the successor is in office, as the new governor seeks to establish an independent political base and to escape the constraints imposed by his predecessor. This divergence generates conflicts that shape the political landscape and that have, in the Ebonyi case, led to dramatic ruptures between predecessors and successors.

The article proceeds in six parts. Following this introduction, a literature review situates the study within scholarship on political succession, godfather politics, and democratic consolidation in Africa. A historical section traces the evolution of Ebonyi's political landscape from state creation in 1996 through the early years of civilian rule. Two analytical sections then examine the Elechi-Umahi transition and the Umahi-Nwifuru transition in detail. A discussion section draws out the broader implications of the Ebonyi case for understanding political succession in Nigeria and beyond. The conclusion reflects on the prospects for more democratic forms of succession in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Godfather Politics in Nigeria

The phenomenon of godfatherism has been a central feature of Nigerian politics since the return to civilian rule in 1999. Political godfathers are influential individuals, typically former or current officeholders, wealthy businessmen, or traditional rulers, who use their resources and networks to determine who gains access to political office and who does not. In return for their support, godfathers expect loyalty, policy influence, and material benefits from the politicians they sponsor (Ayoade, 2006). The relationship is fundamentally transactional, a form of patron-client politics in which the godfather provides access to power and the godson provides returns on that investment.

The scholarly literature on godfatherism has identified several features of the phenomenon. First, godfatherism thrives in contexts of weak political parties, where candidate selection is not governed by transparent rules but by the preferences of powerful individuals (Omobowale & Olutayo, 2007). Second, godfatherism is sustained by the enormous resources that accrue to political office in Nigeria, where state governors control budgets running into billions of naira and have extensive powers of patronage. Control over these resources enables godfathers to reward supporters and punish opponents, creating powerful incentives for compliance (Ayoade, 2006). Third, godfatherism tends to undermine democratic accountability by ensuring that elected officials are responsive to their sponsors rather than to the electorate. The godson who owes his office to a godfather will govern in the interests of that godfather, not necessarily in the interests of the people he was elected to serve.

However, the literature also recognises that the godfather-godson relationship is not static. It evolves over time, and it frequently breaks down. Scholars have documented numerous cases in which godsons, once securely in office, have turned against their godfathers, seeking to establish their political independence and to escape the obligations imposed by their sponsors (Albert, 2005). These ruptures can be intensely conflictual, generating factional struggles within parties, impeachment attempts, and even political violence. The instability of the godfather-godson relationship is thus a central theme in the literature, one that distinguishes godfatherism from more stable forms of political patronage.

Political Succession in Africa

The question of political succession has been a central concern in the study of African politics. In the immediate post-independence period, succession was often violent, with military coups, assassinations, and civil wars marking transitions of power across the continent. The wave of democratisation that began in the 1990s introduced constitutional mechanisms for succession, including term limits, competitive elections,

and independent electoral commissions. However, these formal mechanisms have often been subverted in practice, as incumbents have manipulated constitutional rules, electoral processes, and party structures to extend their tenure or to hand-pick their successors (Posner & Young, 2007).

The literature on political succession in Africa has focused considerable attention on the phenomenon of "third-termism," the attempt by incumbents to extend their tenure beyond constitutional limits. However, scholars have increasingly recognised that the hand-picking of successors, the phenomenon examined in this article, represents an alternative strategy of succession management that can be equally effective in preserving elite interests while maintaining formal compliance with constitutional term limits. By selecting a loyal successor, the outgoing incumbent ensures continuity of policy, protection from prosecution, and ongoing influence over the distribution of resources, all without the political costs of attempting to amend the constitution (Nwagwu, 2022).

Democratic Consolidation and the Quality of Elections

The quality of elections is a central indicator of democratic consolidation. Free and fair elections require not only that votes are accurately counted on election day but also that the pre-election environment provides a level playing field for all candidates. Where incumbents deploy state resources, control electoral commissions, and intimidate opponents, elections lose their democratic character and become mechanisms for legitimising predetermined outcomes (Diamond, 2002).

In the Nigerian context, the quality of gubernatorial elections has varied considerably across states and over time. Some states have witnessed genuinely competitive elections in which incumbents have been defeated and power has changed hands through the ballot box. In other states, including Ebonyi, elections have been characterised by the overwhelming dominance of incumbents and their chosen successors, raising questions about the extent to which electoral outcomes reflect the will of the electorate rather than the preferences of political elites. The literature on electoral integrity provides tools for assessing the quality of elections and for understanding the mechanisms through which incumbents secure favourable outcomes (Norris, 2014).

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF EBONYI STATE

Ebonyi State was created on October 1, 1996, by the military government of General Sani Abacha, carved out of the old Enugu and Abia States. The creation of the state was the culmination of decades of agitation by the Abakaliki bloc, the predominantly Igbo-speaking communities of the old Abakaliki Division, who had long argued that they were marginalised within the political structures of Enugu and Abia

States. The creation of Ebonyi was thus, from its inception, a response to the politics of marginalisation and a recognition of the demand for political self-determination by a community that felt excluded from power.

The political geography of the state is defined by three senatorial districts, which correspond roughly to distinct ethnolinguistic and historical blocs. Ebonyi North, centred on Abakaliki, is the most populous and politically dominant district. Ebonyi Central includes communities such as Ezza, Ikwo, and Ishielu, which share linguistic and cultural ties with the Abakaliki bloc but have at times asserted distinct political identities. Ebonyi South, comprising the Afikpo and Onicha areas, is geographically and culturally distinct from the northern and central districts, with stronger historical ties to the Cross River basin than to the Abakaliki heartland.

Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, political power in Ebonyi State has been concentrated in the hands of the Abakaliki bloc, which has produced all four civilian governors: Sam Egwu (1999–2007), Martin Elechi (2007–2015), David Umahi (2015–2023), and Francis Nwifuru (2023–present). The People's Democratic Party (PDP) has dominated state politics, winning every gubernatorial election and controlling the overwhelming majority of legislative seats. Opposition parties have struggled to establish a foothold, and no opposition candidate has come close to winning the governorship.

The dominance of the PDP and the Abakaliki bloc has been sustained by a combination of factors. The state's reliance on federal allocations, which account for the vast majority of government revenue, has given incumbents control over enormous resources that can be deployed for political purposes. The weakness of civil society and the media has limited the capacity for independent scrutiny of government. And the fragmentation of opposition forces has prevented the emergence of a credible alternative to the PDP. In this context, gubernatorial succession has been determined not by electoral competition but by the internal dynamics of the dominant party and, specifically, by the preferences of the outgoing governor.

THE ELECHI-UMAHİ TRANSITION, 2015

Martin Elechi was elected governor of Ebonyi State in 2007, having previously served as a federal minister and as a close associate of the state's first civilian governor, Sam Egwu. Elechi's first term was marked by significant investment in infrastructure and agriculture, and he was re-elected in 2011 with a substantial majority. As his second term progressed, attention turned to the question of succession. The constitution limited Elechi to two terms, and he would not be on the ballot in 2015. Who would succeed him, and how would the succession be managed?

Elechi's preferred successor was David Umahi, who had served as his deputy since 2011. Umahi was a wealthy businessman and engineer who had made his fortune

in the construction industry before entering politics. He had served as chairman of the Ebonyi State chapter of the PDP and had been a loyal deputy to Elechi. The governor invested significant political capital in ensuring that Umahi would secure the PDP nomination and win the general election.

The mechanisms through which Elechi secured Umahi's succession were multiple. First, Elechi used his control over the PDP state apparatus to ensure that the party's nomination went to his chosen candidate. The state party congress was managed to produce a slate of delegates who were loyal to the governor and who would vote as directed. Potential rivals for the nomination were either co-opted with promises of patronage or sidelined through the manipulation of party rules. Second, Elechi deployed state resources to support Umahi's campaign. Government contractors were expected to contribute to the campaign, and state officials were mobilised to deliver votes in their communities. Third, Elechi used his influence with traditional rulers, community leaders, and other opinion shapers to build a consensus around Umahi's candidacy, presenting the deputy governor as the natural successor who would continue the governor's developmental agenda.

The strategy succeeded. Umahi secured the PDP nomination without serious opposition and won the general election with a comfortable majority. The transition of power in May 2015 was orderly and peaceful. Elechi handed over to his chosen successor, and the new governor pledged to build on his predecessor's achievements. The godfather-godson relationship appeared to have functioned as designed, producing a smooth transfer of power that preserved elite interests and maintained political stability.

However, the relationship between Elechi and Umahi began to fray almost immediately after the transition. Umahi, once in office, moved to establish his own political identity and to distance himself from his predecessor. He reversed some of Elechi's policies, dismissed officials who had been loyal to the former governor, and built his own network of supporters. Elechi, for his part, became increasingly critical of his successor, accusing him of abandoning the developmental agenda they had shared and of governing in an autocratic manner. The rupture between the two men was dramatic and public. By the end of Umahi's first term, Elechi had become one of his most vocal critics, and the former governor's political allies had been systematically excluded from power.

The Elechi-Umahi case illustrates the inherent instability of the godfather-godson relationship. The mechanisms that enable a godfather to secure his successor's election, control over the party apparatus and the deployment of state resources, also create the conditions for conflict. The successor, once in office, inherits the godfather's powers of patronage and can use them to build his own independent political base. The godfather, having lost access to state resources, is left with diminished influence and must either

accept a subordinate role or enter into opposition. The logic of the situation pushes toward conflict, as each man seeks to protect his interests and assert his autonomy.

THE UMAHI-NWIFURU TRANSITION, 2023

David Umahi served two terms as governor, from 2015 to 2023, and was constitutionally barred from seeking a third term. As the 2023 elections approached, the question of succession once again dominated Ebonyi's political discourse. Umahi, having learned from his own experience with Elechi, was determined to manage the succession in a way that would protect his interests and ensure his continued influence after leaving office.

Umahi's chosen successor was Francis Nwifuru, the Speaker of the Ebonyi State House of Assembly. Nwifuru was a lawyer and longtime political ally of Umahi, representing the Izzi constituency in Ebonyi North. He had served as Speaker since 2015 and had been a loyal supporter of the governor throughout his tenure. Umahi invested enormous political capital in ensuring that Nwifuru would succeed him.

The transition was complicated by Umahi's decision to defect from the PDP to the All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2020, part of a broader realignment of Nigerian politics that saw several southeastern governors move to the ruling party. The defection created a complex political landscape. Umahi and his supporters were now in the APC, while the PDP retained significant support in the state. Nwifuru contested the 2023 election on the APC platform, facing a challenge from the PDP candidate, Ifeanyi Odii, a wealthy businessman who had built a substantial campaign organisation.

The mechanisms Umahi deployed to secure Nwifuru's succession were similar to those Elechi had used, but they were adapted to the changed political circumstances. First, Umahi used his control over the APC state apparatus to ensure that Nwifuru secured the party's nomination. Potential rivals were pressured to withdraw, and the party congress was managed to produce a favourable outcome. Second, Umahi deployed state resources to support Nwifuru's campaign. Government contractors, appointees, and local government officials were expected to contribute financially and to mobilise voters in their areas. Third, Umahi leveraged his relationship with the federal government, which was controlled by the APC, to secure federal support for Nwifuru's candidacy. This included the deployment of federal security agencies to ensure a favourable electoral environment.

The election, held in March 2023, was fiercely contested. The PDP candidate, Odii, mounted a strong challenge, drawing on discontent with Umahi's administration and on the resources he had accumulated as a successful businessman. However, Nwifuru won the election with a margin of approximately 30,000 votes, a result that the PDP disputed but that was upheld by the election tribunal. Umahi had succeeded in installing his chosen successor.

The relationship between Umahi and Nwifuru in the early months of the new administration has been, by all accounts, cordial. Nwifuru has pledged to continue Umahi's developmental agenda, and the former governor has been a visible presence in the new administration, attending government events and offering public support. However, the history of the Elechi-Umahi relationship suggests that this harmony may be temporary. The structural factors that generated conflict between Elechi and Umahi, the successor's need to establish independence and the godfather's diminishing resources, are present in the current situation. Whether Nwifuru will, in time, seek to distance himself from his predecessor, as Umahi did from Elechi, remains an open question.

DISCUSSION

The Ebonyi case illuminates several features of godfather politics and political succession in Nigeria that have broader relevance beyond the specific context of the state.

First, the case demonstrates that godfatherism is not merely a matter of wealthy individuals imposing their will on the political process. It is, more fundamentally, a system of succession management that addresses a central problem of democratic politics: how to ensure orderly transitions of power in contexts where formal institutions are weak and where political parties do not function as vehicles for orderly succession. The godfather model provides a mechanism for managing succession that is effective in the short term, ensuring that transitions occur without the violence and instability that have characterised succession in other contexts.

Second, the case reveals the mechanisms through which godfathers secure the election of their chosen successors. These mechanisms include control over party structures, the deployment of state resources, the co-optation of potential rivals, and the mobilisation of traditional authorities and community leaders. These mechanisms are not unique to Ebonyi. They have been documented in gubernatorial transitions across Nigeria, from Anambra to Lagos to Kano, suggesting that they constitute a general repertoire of succession management available to incumbents who seek to determine their successors.

Third, the case demonstrates the inherent instability of the godfather-godson relationship. The resources that enable a godfather to secure his successor's election, control over party machinery and state finances, are transferred to the successor once he assumes office. The successor then has both the incentive and the capacity to build an independent political base and to escape the constraints imposed by his godfather. The structural logic of the situation pushes toward conflict, even when the personal relationship between the two men remains outwardly cordial.

Fourth, the case has implications for the quality of democracy in Nigeria. The godfather model of succession undermines the democratic principle that elected officials should be accountable to the electorate. When the outcome of elections is determined not by the preferences of voters but by the preferences of outgoing incumbents, elections become mechanisms for legitimising predetermined outcomes rather than instruments of popular sovereignty. This erosion of electoral integrity has consequences for democratic consolidation, undermining public confidence in the electoral process and in democratic institutions more broadly.

CONCLUSION

The politics of gubernatorial succession in Ebonyi State reveals the power and the limits of godfather politics in contemporary Nigeria. Outgoing governors have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to determine their successors, using their control over party structures, state resources, and patronage networks to ensure the election of their chosen candidates. The transitions of 2015 and 2023 both followed this pattern, with Martin Elechi installing David Umahi and Umahi, in turn, installing Francis Nwifuru.

Yet the godfather model of succession is not a stable equilibrium. The resources that enable godfathers to secure their successors' election are transferred to those successors once they assume office. The successors then have both the incentive and the capacity to establish their independence, creating the conditions for conflict with their predecessors. The dramatic rupture between Elechi and Umahi illustrates this dynamic, and the structural factors that generated that rupture are present in the current relationship between Umahi and Nwifuru.

The Ebonyi case suggests that the persistence of godfather politics in Nigeria reflects not its stability but its utility as a mechanism for managing succession in a context of weak formal institutions. As long as political parties remain vehicles for elite interests rather than arenas for democratic competition, and as long as incumbents control the vast resources that enable them to determine electoral outcomes, the godfather model will continue to shape Nigerian politics. The challenge for democratic reformers is to build institutions, particularly political parties and electoral commissions, that are strong enough to provide an alternative mechanism for managing succession, one that makes elected officials accountable to the electorate rather than to their predecessors.

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