

## Article

# Godfatherism and Political Instability in Rivers State: A Study of Elite Influence and Governance Outcomes (2015–2024)

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**Abstract:** This paper will analyze how godfatherism has been influenced by political instability in Rivers State, including the elite influence and governance results between 2015 and 2024. The influence and patronization of political personalities by influential elites, which constitutes godfatherism has been one of the most significant occurrences in the political environment of the state, which has impacted the political outcomes of the country, party politics, as well as policy formulations. The research is informed by two research objectives, the first one is to investigate the effects of godfatherism in political instability as well as the second research objective is to determine the effects of political instability on the outcomes of governance. The descriptive qualitative research design was used and content analysis of the secondary sources in the form of academic literature and media reports, government papers and civil society publications was carried out. Results indicate that godfatherism creates political instability due to asymmetric power relationships between political patrons and their protege that results in intra-party disputes, stagnation, and electoral violence. The paper features notable examples of Rivers State politics, including the post-2023 dispute between former Governor Nyesom Wike and Governor Siminalayi Fubara, as a good example of how systems of elite-based patronage can lead to political crises. Additionally, unstable politics are the main culprits affecting the outcomes of governance through disruption of fiscal governance, stalled infrastructure developments, diminished service delivery, and deterioration of confidence by the people in the state institutions. The major governance issues detected in the country are at stagnated budgets, unfinished capital projects, and politically influenced mayoral appointments that focus on loyalty, rather than competence. The research finds that Godfatherism and the networks of elite patronage are significant structural forces contributing to instability and cases of deficit of governance in Rivers State. It advises the strengthening of institutional autonomy, encouraging the use of merit to appoint positions, improving transparency and accountability in governance and involving civil society and federal systems that can address the political crises without interfering with the democratic process. Besides offering viable insights on how to stabilise politics and improve the performance of the public sector in Rivers State, this study advances an advanced knowledge of the impact that informal political structures have on state government.

**Keywords:** *Godfatherism, Political Instability, Governance Outcomes, Rivers State, Elite Influence, Nigeria.*

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## Introduction

The existence of godfatherism within the political system in Nigeria has remained a source of heated academic debate, more so in connection to its possible refusal to promote democratic government and political stability. The personalization of political power with influential people using economic resources, social networks, and coercive power to establish political outcomes and regulate political structures is observed in godfatherism as a form of elite domination. In the Nigerian context, we could explain the phenomenon with the more general logic of prebendal politics, in which public offices are privatized and offered to promote personal accumulation and the formation of patronage networks [1]. At the subnational tier, particularly in politically strategic and resourceful states like Rivers State, godfatherism would take a stronger form following the stakes attached to the control over state resources as well as the control of state institutions.

The formation of Rivers State as a location of elite struggle in the post-democratic era, beginning with the restoration of democratic governance in 1999, and more specifically in the space between 2015 and 2024, can be viewed as the site of heated political disagreements and alliances, as well as frequent governance crises. These processes are not occasional but rather in-built into the process of elite competition, wherein the political actors get entrenched in the system of patron-client relationships that value loyalty over values in the institutions. Such elite arrangements based on politics have been argued by scholars to weaken the institutions of democracy due to their tendencies to compromise accountability, distort the process of elections, and create conflict in situations where competing interests come into play [2], [3]. Political instability in Rivers State, in this respect, is apparent in executive-legislative tussles, party dissolution, election violence, and failure to maintain policy consistency, all indicative of the weakness of the formal governmental administration amid informal power relationships.

The role of political elites who act as godfathers goes beyond electoral sponsorship to include the outright manipulation of governance procedures, such as appointments, allocation of resources, and direction of policies. The concentration of power is also in line with the propositions of the elite theory, which assumes that political decision-making is controlled by a small organized minority group and that it seeks to maintain its hegemony through strategic alliances and domination of resources [4], [5]. Political conflict can develop into a wider instability if the agreement between godfathers and their protégés collapses, thus influencing the results of governance and institutional achievements. Empirical research of the Nigerian setting has consistently shown that godfatherism plays a role in governance deficiencies as it leads to corruption, institutional incapacity, and the diversion of resources to personal interests [6], [7].

The background and context of the research write-up show that there is a relative dearth of contextually relevant, time-based studies which directly and methodically test the relationship between elite power and state governance results in Nigeria, even though there exists a wealth of literature on the issue of godfatherism in the nation and across political development as a whole. The case of Rivers State is particularly interesting because it is a strategic area due to its numerous political conflicts.

Moreover, such a conflict between the formal institutions of democracy and informal groups of elite dominance is one of the most enduring problems of political stability and proper governance in Nigeria. The above contradiction is particularly clear in Rivers State, where the frequent nature of political conflicts, instability of institutions, and inefficiency in governance have marked political life in the state over the last few years. Although there are formal institutions of democracy, such as elections, political parties, and legislative institutions, their operations are often compromised by the prevalent act of godfatherism, which devolves political power to align with a network of loyalty and patronage that exists between an individual and their patron. This has also led to a scenario where institutional legitimacy does not serve as the main source of political power but rather through loyalty to strong elites that exist beyond institutional checks and balances [2].

The continuation of political instability in Rivers State, characterized by the presence of elite conflicts, executive-legislative conflict, party fragmentation, and electoral violence, raises important questions regarding the determining factors of political instability and what this means for governance. While the current literature has recognized the role of godfatherism in determining political outcomes in Nigeria, empirical research that clearly links the elements of elite influence with the results of political instability—and how the latter impacts the outcomes of governance over a given period—remains limited. This literature gap has hindered the opportunity to form a holistic perception of how godfatherism works and its overall implications for consolidating democracy at the subnational level.

Moreover, the lack of long-term institutional stability has immense consequences on governance outcomes, such as poor policies, ineffective service delivery, and a reduced public confidence in government. Homogeneous accountability by godfathers instead of voters often results in the perversion of governance priorities to suit the interests of elite individuals, compromising transparency and accountability [6]. It is not just about the fact that there is godfatherism but rather about whether it can create instability and destabilize governance in such a way that it breeds underdevelopment and poor performance of institutions.

This research thus takes a qualitative descriptive design, relying on content analysis of secondary sources of data to test the hypothesis that godfatherism, political instability, and governance outcomes are related in Rivers State in 2015 through 2024. Placing the analysis into a well-clear context in terms of time and space, the research aims to offer a somewhat in-depth perspective of how informal modes of politics influence the way formal forms of governance are driven and achieved. This paper therefore seeks to discuss the correlation between godfatherism and the instability in Rivers State politics with respect to elite power and the political impacts on the state between the year 2015 and 2024. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. examine how godfatherism influences political instability in Rivers State.
2. assess the impact of political instability on governance outcomes in Rivers State.

## **Conceptual Review**

### **Godfatherism**

Godfatherism in the Nigerian politics refers to what can be described as type of informal political control where powerful people who may be former governors, party bigwigs, or wealthy people sponsor political candidates as a token of loyalty, influence and entry to the world of public resources as long as their patron candidates get the political office. Such patrons, often referred to as godfathers, offer financial support for campaigns, political influence, and the establishment of organizations that drastically boost the political chances of their sponsored candidates, or godsons [2], [3]. Godsons, in turn, are supposed to make their policy decisions and nominations according to the interests of the sponsoring elites, thus introducing a chain of political dependence that makes the formal institutional requirements subordinate to the wishes of informal power brokers. The system shows traces of prebendal politics, whereby being elected to public office is seen as an avenue for distributing economic and political favors, as opposed to serving as a platform for serving the people [1].

Godfatherism in Rivers State is not just hypothetical but an existing reality witnessed throughout several electoral cycles. Leading political figures like Rotimi Amaechi, Nyesom Wike, and subsequent leaders have used their influence to manipulate both the current and outside the party system to influence the selection of candidates, party coalitions, and determine how to be governed [2]. Although this process strengthens the political success of elected candidates, it tends to marginalize other political players and feeds the competition among elites. The result is a political culture in which loyalty to patronage networks becomes the central element over institutional accountability, establishing the groundwork to a series of conflicts when godsons demand independence or when other elite groups vie to power.

### **Political Instability**

Political instability, as defined in this paper, can be understood as a set of chronic disruptions on political processes, institutional failures, as well as repeated elite struggles that destabilize in the regular operations of the governance systems. Such upheavals can take the form of executive-legislative strains, intra-party politics, protests, violence during elections, and policy instability—all indicative of underlying vulnerability in the political system [4], [7]. The occurrence of political instability is not an isolated issue of a few events but is often an indication of underlying structural conflicts involving doctrinal elite rivalry and poor institutional structures. In many areas where godfatherism influences political relationships, politics tend to become unstable when there is a struggle among elites to establish control, when the godsons are unwilling to be patronized, or when informal types of politics may be in conflict with official institutional requirements.

The government charts of Rivers State have often been punctuated with moves toward political turbulence, such as legislative gridlock, interpersonal squabbles, and factional wrangling. The division between ex-governor Nyesom Wike and his previous political ally, Governor Siminalayi Fubara, in the year 2023 can be used as an example of how the intensity of elite conflict can escalate into a larger political conflict. This created a phase of heightened executive-legislative hostility, judicial issues, and interference in policy execution, leading to conflicting opinions on appointments and the control of party systems, as well as access to state resources, which in turn exacerbated overall state instability [8]. These illustrations highlight the extent to which systemic instability can be

accentuated and how government practices can be distressed by elite politics through godfather-son ties.

### **Governance Outcomes**

Governance outcomes are the effectiveness, efficiency, and responsiveness of political leadership to provide social goods, implement policies, and manage public resources in a manner that supports public interests and integrity in an organization. Good governance relates to accountability, transparency, rule of law, and institutional performance and is an important measure of democratic consolidation [9]. However, when the forms of governance are influenced by an informal system of power and elite patronage networks, the results may be skewed in such a way that they benefit the individual rather than the collective. In this case, there is a risk of diverting public resources, uneven delivery of services, and a deterioration in the performance of institutions due to constant disruption by elites [6].

Budgets, execution, infrastructure delivery, and policy consistency have also experienced indicators of disruptions in governance results in Rivers State. Elite power struggles, coupled with levels of political unrest and media and civil society coverage, have been linked to budgetary slack-time, stalled capital projects, and disjointed performances of the government [8]. These examples show that the decisions governance makes are mainly affected by the political environment within which they are made, not just the technical outcomes of bureaucratic processes. The relations between these concepts can be understood through the lens of power relations that constitute political entities. Being one of the forms of elite influence, godfatherism creates webs of patronages that influence institutional relations and political conduct. Elite wrangles that are caused by godfatherism are often a major cause of political instability particularly when institutional independence and loyalty clash. This instability, by disrupting policy continuity, delaying delivery of projects, and undermining institutional accountability, in turn, undermines outcomes in governance. Thus, in the conceptual framework of the study, godfatherism leads to political instability, which further negatively impacts on the outcome of governance in Rivers State.

This conceptual review presents both theoretical and practical insights on the dynamics of the organizational structure of politics and governance in Rivers State, which forms the basis of subsequent empirical and analytical studies in the area by providing a shamanic interpretation of the two concepts and how they relate to each other.

## **Methodology**

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

This research is based majorly on Elite Theory and to some extent on the theories of Clientelism and Political Patronage Theory that are considered as one potent tool to analyze the role of godfatherism in political turmoil and governance in Rivers State.

The Elite Theory is one of the theories proposed by Mosca (1939) and Pareto (1968), which posits that political power and decision-making within every society are controlled by a small group of elites, while the majority is left out politically. Such elites are in power by virtue of organizational capabilities, wealth, social networks, and coercive power. In the case of Rivers State, Elite Theory describes how political godfathers such as Nyesom Wike, Rotimi Amaechi, and others accumulate power by financing candidates (godsons), who then act according to their interests. This dependence of elected officials on such elite sponsors generates asymmetrical power relations, which lead to competition and contraction in cases where godsons demand independence or where other equally powerful godfathers seek dominance, resulting in political instability [2], [3].

In addition to Elite Theory, the Clientelism and Political Patronage Theory focuses on the exchange relations between the interests of the patrons (elites) and those of the client (political protégés or citizens) within the political system. In Rivers State, godfathers supply resources, electoral assistance, or political protection to their godsons, who, in return, offer loyalty, state resources, or political favors. This patron-client system creates dependency that disregards institutional autonomy and the formal system of governance. It further explains how this cycle repeats over time: when the interests of elites cannot intersect, political instability spills over into legislative deadlock, party factionalism, or violent conflicts, as seen in the electoral years 2015, 2019, and 2023 [6], [7].

Collectively these theories offer a conceptual framework in the analysis of the structural and relational dynamics of godfatherism in Rivers State. Elite Theory describes the power concentration and dominance of political godfathers and Clientelism describes how the dominance is operationalized, such as conditional loyalty of godsons, manipulation of party structures, and strategic distribution of state resources. Combined, the frameworks enable the research to not only understand why political instability takes place but also the problem of political instability turning into issues of governance, including stalled development projects, distorted distributions of available resources, and diminished institutional accountability.

In addition, the theoretical framework offers a ground upon which to comprehend the feedback loop of elite dominance, political instability and the outcome of governance. It led to political instability in the occurrence of antagonism between elite interests or the efforts of godson to become independent; which hampers governance and undermines institutions, consequently strengthening the need to be godfather-dependent, thereby perpetuating the cycle. Through these theories, the study provides a wider analytical frame through which the issues of politics in Rivers State can be explained by attributing both the incidences of conflicts (e.g., conflicts between Wike and Fubara) and general tendencies of the politics of the state.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Godfatherism and Political Instability in Rivers State**

Godfatherism has been an endemic structural process in Rivers State that has influenced elite rivalry, electioneering and turmoil in governance. Godfatherism here has been described as the strong political players, who are usually the past governors, the heads of the parties, or influential godfathers, who control the nomination of candidates, the machinery of the parties, and state resources and alliances. These are the kinds of actors who, in return, have protégés in their system (godsons) whose votes, upon coming to power, will give them some influence in state governance [2], [3]. However, in cases where such reciprocal settlements are not kept, particularly when godsons attempt to establish their own rule or tamper with the power of the godfather, political anarchy is the natural consequence.

An especially interesting case of this activity is the long standing power battle involving the former Governor Nyesom Wike and his former political ally Governor Siminalayi Fubara. Wike had handpicked Governor Fubara to replace him in the 2023 Rivers State governorship elections; he eventually won with a sizeable majority, defeating his primary rival, Tonye Cole of the All Progressives Congress (APC) by a large margin in terms of votes (tonnage figures were widely reported) (with the PDP margin being very high). Nevertheless, the relations between Fubara and Wike began to fall apart shortly after reining power, over power distribution amidst the wrangles over power and structures within the state. This falling out attracted long-term institutional bad blood between the executive and members of the Rivers State House of Assembly many of whom were viewed to be loyal to Wike resulting in threats to impeach, a legislative stalemate, and overt confrontations (e.g., suspension attempts, public wrongful acts of illegal legislative activity) that brought governance to a standstill.

The level of this elite rivalry was so high such that at one point in 2025, the Federal Government declared a six month state of emergency in Rivers State, the governor and the legislature suspended as governance paralysis escalated and anarchy soared towards a new level of governance crisis. President Bola Tinubu made the emergency rule look like a constitutional action to avoid chaos, even though it was generally seen as beaming under the name of federalism, a godfather-godson crisis that risked to destabilize the region as a whole as it was increasingly oil dependent (Reuters; AP News). These instances describe how the Godfather fueled elite competition can go past the normal political disputes, preventing democratic governance and consider extra constitutional solutions.

The fact that Rivers State politics has taken time to be prone to instability caused by the godfathers finds historical grounds. According to scholars and local analysts (Guardian Nigeria review) since the Fourth Republic (since 1999), the latter have influenced political leadership campaigns, often fueling or promoting factionalism and circumventing institutional independence through the maneuvers of political godfathers like Rotimi Amaechi (former governor and former Minister of Transportation) and others. Here the

failure to become institutionalised and the fact that the elite is often chiefly a sponsor of godsons, so these godsons are likely to become compromised by internal political loyalties and the demands of elite factions when their interests clash, especially under this pattern.

The election cycles have also been hugely affected by the destabilising effect of godfatherism. Rivers state is reported to be one of the most volatile electoral arenas in Nigeria based on comparison study. The 2015 and 2019 elections also saw electoral violence, voter intimidation, as well as collisions between supporters of specific parties, which were often instigated by the competition to gain power over political patronage networks and access to state resources. Under such circumstances, political mobilisation is normally above policy concepts and rather it is based on patron-client bargaining where godfathers seek to gain election and power through the help of thugs and agents. This brings about instability and dejitlag of the democratic processes.

Civil society voices and the opinion of the locals support these trends. Analysts and opinion articles in the Nigerian media have directly attributed the current political turmoil in Rivers State to structural imprint of godfatherism. They argue that this makes political actors quick to gauge their authority on the basis of elite sponsorship, rather than just institutional requirements, which encourages factional violence and deteriorates the social confidence of the people in governance [8]. The consequence is a politics of instability, both as a symptom and an effect of godfatherism: the power concentration with the help of elite networks produces competition that disrupts the stability of institutions and co-fuels conflict cycles.

All said and done, godfatherism is one of the sources of political instability in Rivers State as it creates a cycle of elite competition, destroys institutional independence, and generates the recurring conflict over patronage, power, and control over state finances. The cases of former Governor Wike and Governor Fubara, as one of the prominent political leaders, are one of the brightest examples of how the elite sponsorship and the consequent breakup of alliance hardens into political crises undermining democratic processes, necessitating extraordinary federal intervention, and destabilising governing bodies. When collectively considered, these tendencies underscore the structural role of godfatherism in political instability in Rivers State, the impact of which does not affect solving particular individuals but the general state of democracy in the region.

#### **Impact of Political Instability on Governance Outcomes in Rivers State.**

Political unrest that has predominantly been informed by godfatherism and Yoruba struggles in Rivers State has significantly and quantifiably affected governance outcomes in many aspects, undermining the electorally driven trust in the government, development planning and institutional delivery. The instability characteristic of the state is now a recurring problem for the government, affecting the security of the people, the delivery of services to the people, state budgets, and institutional cohesion across multiple and consecutive electoral cycles between 2015 and 2024 [7], [6].

The most apparent impacts of instability have been in state budgeting and fiscal management. Rivers State also regularly experienced budget paralysis due to the ongoing power struggle between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and his predecessor and political sponsor, Nyesom Wike, especially towards the end of 2023 up to 2025. Posts by the Rivers State House of Assembly and other local media indicated that conflicts between the legislative and executive branches (often linked to differences in elite groups) led to the postponement of annual budgets in several fiscal years. Statewide development projects were curtailed due to delayed funding allocations or budgets being allocated in essential areas such as healthcare, education, and urban infrastructure [10].

An example is that, due to budgetary setbacks occasioned by political stalemate, there have been several delays in the reopening of the East West Road, a key infrastructure development project that was expected to trigger economic action. This led to a situation where budget appropriations were difficult to agree upon between the conflicting camps within the executive and legislative houses, and contractors and community heads openly raised concerns about planned releases being either suspended or postponed [8]. Along with stifling economic attempts, these delays eroded public morale regarding the government's capability to undertake major infrastructure projects.

An unstable position within the healthcare industry led to the staffing problems and unequal approach to the policies. Between 2021-2024, Rivers State public health facilities experienced such issues as unreliable pay of critical medical personnel, nominations of

agency heads more of loyalty rather than skills and technical proficiency, and disruption in planning the supply chain of required medications. On the part of the local health worker unions, including the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) Rivers chapter, there were many strike threats due to political interference in the administration of its hospitals, including the allocation of budgetary funds, which they directly linked to the protracted political disputes [11]. Consequently, the capacity to deliver healthcare services in significant state hospitals deteriorated when it was the most needed after the pandemic.

Political instability also affected local governance and the delivery of services adversely. The imbalance in the developmental outcomes of different communities as early as 2016/2017 occurred because of conflicts between the leaders of Local Government Areas (LGA) and the political elites at the state level, who often had the backing of a competing power bloc. The analysis of local government crises in Rivers State, by ThisDay Live has made it evident that, political instability in certain LGAs has caused the emergence of protracted leadership crises in the state making it very impossible to carry out various duties in sanitation, rural road development, and community health programs since the locals have been forced to depend on informal systems and patronage other than an official governmental one. These inequalities are used to show how political turmoil at the top usurps essential services at the ground [12][13][14][15].

The second interesting example of instability in governance was the six month federal emergency rule invoked in 2025. Even though the federal government under President Bola Tinubu framed its action as a constitutional corrective, the emergency intervention effectually suspended the important state governance processes and transferred the powers of the administration to appointed administrators. As a case in point, the federal government took over the Rivers State judiciary and House of Assembly, thus meddling with local legislation, backlog, and policy analysis (Reuters; AP News). Though the extraordinary federal intervention was meant to bring back sanity, it continued to disrupt continuous developmental planning and alienate the citizens more as they felt out of touch with the elected leadership.

These disruptions have had a cumulative impact of institutional repercussions such as a dented performance measure in the quality of public service delivery and delays in the completion of capital projects as well as diluted integrity of state governing frameworks. The local civil society groups such as the Centre for Fiscal Transparency and Accountability (CFTA) mentioned in their 2024 report point out that Rivers State fiscal efficiency rankings have progressed backward in the years when it was characterized by increased political instability, where the state has had more politically stable neighbors.

An evaluation of the view of the population and commentary by the media in publications such as The Guardian Nigeria, Premium Times, and Vanguard Nigeria was consistent; citizens held political instability and elite squabble more accountable than technical shortcomings in governance failures especially in service provision, infrastructure infrastructural projects, and administrative efficiency. Business associations and community leaders also cited insecurity and unpredictability as major impediments to inflows of investment, particularly in the non-oil sector where it has not been easy to attract reliable partner in the private sector, partly due to political risk.

In general, the data shows that political instability in Rivers State as a consequence of elite competition and godfatherism has its practical and extensive impacts on the results of governance. It destabilizes fiscal planning, service delivery, turns the public administration into a faction control arena, and eroded institutional trust. These effects are not an individual event but a pattern of systematic governance predicaments in the sense that political stability is an essential precondition to coherent policy implementation, and to sustainable development.

### **Conclusion**

Through the findings, we can say that godfatherism is a key factor of political instability in Rivers State. Elite-based sponsorship of political aspirants leads to dependencies and antagonisms that undermines institutions, processes of making laws and elections. Moreover, political instability has a negative impact on governance results, interfering with the development projects, postponing fiscal operations, undermining service provision, and diminishing the trust of the people in government. The data indicate that unless structural role of godfathers and elite patronage networks is tackled, Rivers State may tend

to keep undergoing the impact of instability and deficit in governance.

This research proposes that the only way to end this cycle is through political reform, institutional strengthening and encouraging democratic accountability. The diminishment of the role of godfathers and political actors being answerable to official establishments instead of to authentic networks of elites will contribute to an increase in stability and better governance results.

### **Recommendations**

The key findings of the study were mentioned in the following recommendations:

1. First, Rivers State needs to restructure its political and electoral institutions to diminish the towering effect of godfathers. It involves the empowerment of the State Independent Electoral Commission, solidification of party regulatory boards and the imposition of regulations that guard off manipulation of party elections and party systems by the elite. With checks on political sponsorship institutionalized, the state will be able to minimize factionalism, curb the antecedent and post-election wars and sponsor governance stability.
2. The parties and leadership in the states should pledge their political systems to appointments based on merit and inclusive governance as opposed to giving out positions as a reward to godfathers or part followers. Raising competence and serving the people in the staffing of all critical government agencies, ministries and local councils should be the number one priority of leaders. It will be making sure that there is transparency in the appointments of office holders and projects that can be given out to ensure that corruption is reduced, the decision making of the elites is minimized and there is efficiency in service delivery.
3. There should be strategic involvement of citizens, civil society and mechanisms of federal oversight to make political players accountable. The risks of godfatherism and the need to ensure that your own governance is overseen by the people should be promoted using civic education campaigns, and any misconduct in terms of elections, budgets, and projects undertaken by the state can be checked by the civil society groups. Also, a situation where governance is about to be derailed through political wrangles as has been observed in the past between Governor Wike and Governor Fubara, there are times when there can be his measured federal interventions as long as there is a clear road-map and legal restraints to prevent derailment of the democratic processes.

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