E-ISSN: 1115 - 8530 P-ISSN: 3026-8958

MPRI-JFRBD | INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF FINANCIAL RES. AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT VOL. 08 NO. 7 – APRIL, 2025

TRENDS AND ISSUES IN THE SEARCH FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTONOMY AS CATALYST FOR GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA SINCE 1960

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70382/mejfrbd.v8i7.030

Abstract

The subject of local government autonomy and control in Nigeria has been a topical issue overtime especially in view of the expected multiplier effect it would bring when implemented vis-à-vis the lip service paid to it by several of the country's political leaders. In 2024, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of financial autonomy for local government; still, nothing different was done. By adopting the historical research design, this study utilized the qualitative method to analyze data obtained from secondary sources in the effort to investigate the subject of local government autonomy in Nigeria since independence in 1960 with a view to unearthing the issues surrounding the lack of attention to local government autonomy by majority of Nigerian political leaders. The research revealed that aside the 1976 local [redacted] government reforms instituted by former General Obansanjo and the transitional reforms of 1985-1993 under former President Ibrahim Babangida, most other regimes failed to honour local government autonomy for reasons ranging from constitutional ambivalence to defective federal practice, poor intergovernmental relations, institutional weaknesses and

KEY WORDS: Local, Autonomy, Government, Constitution, Political Leaders.

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unpatriotic disposition of most state governments. The study concludes with recommendations such as presidential directives for full implementation of local government financial autonomy as pronounced by the apex court, review of the Nigerian constitution and delineating areas of intergovernmental friction (especially in finance), effecting sanctions on state governments who tamper with local government finances, and replicating/resurrecting the 1976 local government reforms.

Introduction

The implication of autonomy for local governments in Nigeria and the issues cum contradictions around the phenomenon over the years need to be fully laid out. The concept of autonomy here is a by-product of constitutional devolution of powers to the federal, state/regional governments and local authorities so that the local governments just like the other tiers can exercise independence and autonomy at its own level in order to cope with the numerous responsibilities facing it. Devolution of power therefore is a form of decentralization of power aimed at promoting rapid development of a country through granting of administrative and financial autonomy to the various levels or tiers of government.

When power is devolved to local people at the grass root, it enhances the legitimacy of government and its programmes. By granting the local areas a measure of distinctive autonomy and recognizing their linguistic identities, devolution of powers enables government to distribute seamlessly local goods and services according to the local needs.

Needless to say, all the functions of local government center around localism or the local people namely local participation in politics, local resource mobilization, efficient service delivery to the local people and preservation of the local customs and ties clearly buttressed by cultural and linguistic homogeneity. Beyond the often casual and spurious conception of local government services as being ineffective and even non-existent, the following functions are often performed by local government administration:

[1] Inspection of meat and abattoirs
[2] Provision of nursery, primary and adult education
[3] Provision of scholarships and bursaries award
[4] Provision of public libraries and reading rooms

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[5] Agricultural and animal health extension services and veterinary clinics, fire services
[6] Lighting and drainage
[7] Support for arts and culture
[8] Control of pollution
[9]Control of beggars and prostitution
[10] Homes for destitute, the insane and orphans
[11] Public housing programmes
[12] Regulation and control of buildings
[13] Town and country planning
[14] Operation of commercial undertakings
[15] Control of traffic and parking
[16] Pipe sewerage systems
(Aghayere, 1997**).**

Following from the above list of statutory functions and other duties not captured in the above 'roll call,' such as, refuse disposal including evacuation of dead bodies on local streets and highways, provision and maintenance of market stalls, earth and tarred roads, water, electricity and health centres, it becomes imperative to grant local autonomy status to all local governments in Nigeria. It is for this reason that the 1979 constitution provided for local government autonomy by stating inter alia:

> " …..It is hereby declared the policy of the state that the territorial and political subdivisions of the state shall enjoy genuine and meaningful local autonomy to enable them to attain their fullest development as self-reliant communities and make them more effective partners in the attainment of national goals"

Also, there is the local Government Autonomy bill in the fourth republic which seeks to amend the constitution to repeal the joint state - local government account and provide for a special account where all allocations due to the local government councils from the federation account and state government shall be paid.

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The corollary of financial and administrative autonomy status being canvassed via legislation for local government councils is the expectation of enhanced local participation, effective resource mobilization and optimal service delivery. In other words, the autonomy would engender grass roots mobilization of the populace through adequate representations, policy formulations, implementations and equitable distribution of resources and services.

It must be mentioned here that the 1976 local government reforms took bold steps to actualize the aforementioned ideals of local government autonomy by recognizing local government as the third tier of government worthy of standing alone with financial and administrative empowerment from the federal government. This effort was however not sustained by successive regimes or administrations in Nigeria. Suffice it to say that beginning from 1960 when the nation gained political independence till date, the fortunes of local government autonomy status have been inconsistent in spite of the plethora of socio-economic gains that accrue from such autonomy status. The incongruous reasons behind this jigsaw movement stem from constitutional ambivalence, defective federal practice, unbalanced intergovernmental relations , institutional weaknesses as well as lack of patriotism on the part of political leaders especially at the state level of government.

For ease of comprehension, this paper has adopted a historical/thematic approach by taking the reader through the nation's experiences in local government administration from 1960 to 1975, the 1976 reforms, the period of transitional reforms under former Military President Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) and finally, local government autonomy trends in the present Fourth Republic from 1999 till date.

Statement of Problem

Almost all the regimes that have governed Nigeria since 1960 have tinkered with local government administration either from a patriotic standpoint to make it an independent third tier of government or from a self serving perspective by ignoring the subject or even dismantling the available structures and efforts already made in the direction of achieving autonomy for local governments. In view of the plethora of socio-economic and even political developmental benefits that accrue from such autonomy status but which are often undermined by most

political leaders, it became necessary to delve into this phenomenon with the objective of unraveling the issues behind the inconsistency exhibited by most members of the political elite towards the attainment of economic independence for local government councils. This, exactly, is what this study sets out to achieve.

Theoretical Framework

In an effort to explain theoretically the concept and phenomenon of local government autonomy in Nigeria, the Political Development Theory becomes very apt in this discourse. Basically, this theory is about the problems of political development. It has to do with the analysis of government and politics particularly in trying to understand the political and developmental problems confronting the less developed countries. Political development refers to the process whereby a political system undergoes significant change without abrupt and radical restructuring of its components (Kousoulas, 1975). It means a continuous process of growth which is produced by forces within the system and which is absorbed by the system (Eisenstadt,1967). In the exact words of Eisenstadt:

> " This theory is associated with observations and conclusions concerning the capacity of what until recently have been called 'underdeveloped' countries to develop the will and still to assume new governmental responsibilities and to earn general acquiescence in the developments"(Eisenstadt,1967).

Political Development theory further reveals to us that usually, the early stage of industrialization, modernization, and structural differentiation create a range of political problems which may or may not be successfully solved by government in the societies concerned.

In applying or relating this theory to the Nigerian political experience in dealing with the development of local government administration, one can easily discern that the phenomenon or issue of local government autonomy has proven to be a hard nut to crack by successive regimes and administrations in the country since the emergence of colonial rule. The gains or benefits from institutionalizing local government autonomy are glaring but the political character of the Nigerian state and the ecology of public administration have often conspired to subordinate economics to politics thereby making it difficult to realize total transformation of

the local government system which in turn would have led to positive socio-economic turnaround of the fortunes of people at the grass roots.

Political character issues such as ethnocentrism/ethnicity, nepotism, kleptomania, lack of patriotism, absence of visionary leadership, the dominance of the spoils system over the merit system and politics of prebendalism, often frustrate and hold back political leaders and public officials from taking bold steps to better the lot of the populace. Similarly, environmental factors such as social responsibility, cultural norms and values, political considerations, population issues, economic policies, educational attainment and others, do influence public administration in Nigeria and most other emergent states. In line with the postulates of Political Development Theory, the political leaders in most developing countries like Nigeria grapple with these drawbacks to development, sometimes to no avail. Yet, governance continues to thrive. This is why and how the issue of political and financial autonomy in local government administration in Nigeria has come to be where it is today despite the fact that local government administration is still in operation. This scenario agrees with the postulates of the Political Development Theory.

Methodology

The adopted research method here is essentially library research, which means reliance on other works on the subject and thereby using secondary data-books, newspapers, journals, and others which include information from television and radio as well as government publications.

Since the data source here is principally secondary, the technique of data analysis shall be qualitative (through content analysis). Content analysis is a system of sourcing for data by obtaining and analyzing information from records, documents, newspapers, live reportage, diaries, television and radio shows(Nashimiah, 1996; Dyer, 1979; and Babbie,1986). In content analysis, objectivity is guaranteed by carrying out analysis in such a way that other researchers may replicate it and obtain similar results (Agara,2009).

The Period of Partial/Non-Existent Local Government Autonomy (1960-1975)

Banko (2020) and Olowu (1989) reveal that the earliest beginnings of local government autonomy in Nigeria dates back to the years soon after the second

world war when political developments in Nigeria and outside led to the abolition of indirect rule system which was replaced by the British multi-tier local government system. This new system emphasized "full grown local government which would be efficient, participatory and relatively autonomous" (Olowu, 1989).The eastern region brazed the trail in 1950 and was followed by the west in 1952 and the north in 1954. In the east, the reforms produced a three-tier structure, namely county councils, district councils and local councils, each autonomous of one another.

Further reforms were carried out in 1955, 1958, and 1960 so that on the eve of independence, there were two(2) municipal, 13 urban and 94 county and 1981 local councils in the eastern region (Gboyega,1987). In the western region, the structure included Divisional Council, All-purpose District Councils and local councils. In the north, similar reforms were effected, which produced the following structures: chief-in-council (38), chief-and-council (13),councils(16). The 1954 Native Authority Law also allowed the establishment of subordinate Native Authority such as District, Town, Outer and Village councils. It is noteworthy that these councils were democratically elected although some traditional rulers were nominated as members of the council. An elected chairman presided over council meetings but on ceremonial occasions, the President (the traditional ruler) presided.

Regrettably as postulated above, and in line with the character of political development in developing countries, the gains made from the multi-structural experiment in Nigerian local government administration towards autonomy was soon after independence bedeviled by corruption, political crisis, nepotism, inappropriate structure, harassment of political opponents by local authority police and more importantly by the increasing centralist orientation of post-independence regional government (Olowu,1989). Suffice it to say that all these variables were traceable to a defective federal practice, constitutional ambivalence and weak institutions of state. In fact, by the time the military entered the political arena in 1966, many regions had completely abandoned the democratic experiment in local government and substituted them with management committees. Oronsaye (1997) posits that the military regimes in the regions dismissed these management committees and appointed sole administrators. In the early 1970s, some state governments notably East Central, Rivers, South Eastern and Mid-West, went further to abolish local governments

altogether and substituted for them a form of local field administrative model known as "Divisional or Developmental Administration". In the Western states, the Council Manager system was experimented just before the 1976 nation-wide reforms of local government administration.

The defective federal practice detected above worked to frustrate in no small measure the fortunes of local government autonomy in Nigeria. A situation whereby local government administration remained unstable in a country with a federal constitution was a very worrisome development and this was one of the issues that precipitated the 1976 reforms. In fact, local government at the time became mere extensions of state governments because the latter was wielding absolute control on the former both administratively and operationally. The local governments were unable to perform their statutory functions even though efficiency and development were emphasized by the military government while taking over in1966. They lacked adequate financial base which was further weakened by the abolition of some revenue generating avenues such as poll tax by some state governments during the First Republic.

Furthermore, there was lack of local participation and involvement in local government affairs as there were no democratically elected councilors. Consequently, local governments became unviable with numerous problems traceable to the more fundamental problem of unwillingness of state governments to concede or decentralize powers and to make investments required to develop the local areas (Okoh, 1996). That was the state of affairs before the 1976 reforms.

The 1976-1979 Local Government Reforms: The Era of Full but Brief Autonomy.

Arising from the above mentioned contradictions of the local government system and the urgent need to ameliorate the situation, the military administration of former General Olusegun Obasanjo carried out the famous 1976 Local Government Reforms. The reforms were for reaching as it were but was later frustrated by the same political and environmental factors cited earlier. Generally considered, the 1976 local government reforms was the most radical and significant in many respects. The reforms created a single- tier ,multipurpose structure throughout the country. It defined local government administration, the objectives, functions, financial resources, with uniform standards and procedures.

It democratized the system with a three-year life span, spelt out the roles of key functionaries of the council and constituted a unified local government service in each state. These reforms were subsequently incorporated into the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Unlike previous reforms where local government remained an exclusive state responsibility, the 1976 reforms granted a level of autonomy to councils. The councils now became recognizable entities in the political and economic development of the country. Powers and functions of local government were provided for in the constitution. These powers could be increased but apparently not decreased by state governments. The local governments in each state were listed in the constitution which meant that states could not constitutionally abolish them. All of these provisions granted a constitutional status to local government and a degree of independence from states not hitherto enjoyed .Certainly, the third-tier status of local government at the time radically changed the Nigerian political system.

Each local government became all-purpose in that it had full responsibility for all local government functions (including the treasury) in its area of authority. Again, arising from the new uniformity in structure and function of all local governments, each state issued a local government edict which provided for the establishment, structure, composition, functions and financing of local governments in that particular state. These edicts conformed with the federal guidelines. It was observed however that though the organizational and functional features of local government were basically the same in the several states, there were allowable variations in details of structure and composition(King M.C,1988).

Furthermore, the 1976 reforms ensured that the council's powers extended to a wide range of activities. These included markets, motor vehicle parks ,sanitary inspection, sewerage, refuse disposal, parks, public conveniences, noise control, registration of vital statistics, collection of property taxes and other rates, control of slaughter houses and licensing, and regulation of motorbikes. The council exercised exclusive powers over these activities (Bendel LG Edict, 1976). In addition, local governments could now concurrently exercise powers with the state government over an equally extensive area of activities. Health centers and services, nursery, primary and adult education, public libraries, fire services, water supply, traffic control, support of arts and culture, pollution control, public

utilities, soil erosion and agricultural and animal health extension services were some of the areas in which local and state governments share responsibilities and powers.

The reforms envisaged the finance and general purposes committee as the "cabinet" of the local government council. This cabinet was composed of the chairman of the local council who chaired the cabinet, the supervisory councilors, and not more than two other members. It was responsible for the regulation and control of finance of local government. The cabinet also considered and awarded contracts subject to limits prescribed by the local government. The executive authority of this body extended to the "general running of the affairs of the local government." It was charged with the implementation of the decisions of local government which were not the specific responsibilities of another body. Hence, the cabinet, in the form of the finance and general purposes committee emerged as a relatively powerful and controversial organ of local government.

It has already been posited that despite the lofty goals and achievement of the 1976 local government reforms, the same ailment that bogged down previous efforts at revitalizing local councils, still scuttled the 1976 reforms. First, the new third tier status of local government enshrined in the constitution of 1979, had its ambiguities. For instance, the constitution established a particular type of local government system, but, it allowed the states to share in its structuring. Next was the return to civil rule in 1979 which came as a catalyst to frustrate the reforms of 1976. Okoh A.O (1996) remarked that "the tempo of reforms towards democratization and grass root development of local government suffered reverses during the Second Republic (1979- 1983)". The civilian governors merely increased the number of local government areas from 301 to about 800 (Gboyega, 1987) and appointed caretaker committees to administer the councils. Due to some technical problems, the then National Electoral Commission (NEC) was unable to conduct election to these councils. The proliferation of local government areas during the Second Republic, although politically motivated, weakened the status, autonomy and viability of local governments. More worrisome was the fact that local governments were denied their legitimate funds by majority of state governments which deducted at source from the statutory allocation to provide some common services such as education. In addition, many state governments did not pay to local governments their

statutory share of the state revenues. Again, some local government revenue sources such as tenement rates were encroached upon by some state governments. With this frosty state-local relations, local government became ineffective, undermined, denied and lacked any form of autonomy as the state control became very high.

The Period of Transitional Reforms under Military President Babangida(1985-1993)

It is on record that during the General Babangida administration (1985-1993), further reforms were carried out which enhanced the autonomy of local government administration. Most of the state controlling agencies were removed. For instance, the state ministry of local government was abolished although a directorate of local government and chieftaincy affairs was created in the Governor's office. The state government supervision over local expenditure and programmes was also removed; and an independent local government service commission was established and the conduct of elections into local government councils became a responsibility of the then National Electoral Commission (NEC). Furthermore, the financial base of councils was equally enhanced while their statutory allocation from the Federation Account was progressively increased to 20% and directly payable to local government authorities. Also, the local government share of the Value Added Tax (VAT) became 25% while the state was statutorily required to give local governments 10% of its internally generated revenue.

Too, the presidential system with its complete separation of powers became fully operational in local government administration. The chairman and supervisory councilors constituted the executive arm of local government administration while the elected councilors made up the legislature arm.

These reforms to a large extent were sustained during the brief period of Military General Sanni Abacha (1993- 1998), as Head of State of Nigeria.

The Issue of Local Government Autonomy in the Fourth Republic (1999 Till Date)

There is no gainsaying that after the Fourth Republic kicked off in 1999, the usual penchant for new civilian governments to dismantle already established gains in local government administration, reared its ugly head again. The civilians assumed

duty with the usual attendant political culture of ethnocentrism, kleptomania, mediocrity, prebendalism and self- serving interpretation of contentious constitutional provisions affecting their interests.

The issue has always been the amount of power permitted by the constitution to be devolved to local councils irrespective of what the military used fiat to achieve during their time in the name of reforms. Basically, under the Nigerian Federal arrangement, while the constitution demarcated and allocated legislative functions between the national / federal government and the states, the local governments were made to function based on laws made by the states (the sub-national) legislatures. This deliberate state of affairs has generated much controversy among Nigerian constitutional and political commentators as most proponents of local government autonomy have favoured the total devolution of autonomous power and functions to the local government councils while others favour the status quo whereby the local government remains the appendage of the state government. In the very recent past, this matter reached a crescendo as the National Assembly debated over the issue of granting more autonomy to the local government councils. The National Assembly in the Fourth Republic has really demonstrated patriotism by processing the bill seeking the President, the state Governors and their state Assemblies to shelve politics and approve financial and administrative autonomy for local government councils (Vanguard, February, 2023). It was reported that while some state governors and their law makers have considered and passed the bill in their respective jurisdictions, a significant others have refused to touch it and eight other proposed legislations.

One of the major issues under contention is the joint revenue account being run by the state government and local government councils whereby the former is expected to remit monies due to the latter from the federal government as well as 10 percent of the state internally generated revenue to the local government. It is being canvassed by the National Assembly for the joint account system to be discontinued since most state governments do not comply with the requirement of remitting monies due to local governments. This is one of the bills being processed by the National Assembly so that State Assemblies and State Governors would co-operate and do the needful. In place of the joint account which abrogation is being sought, a special account is being proposed where all

allocations due to the local government councils, from the federation account and state government, shall be paid.

The proposed legislation also mandates each state to pay to local government councils in its area of jurisdiction such proportion of its internally generated revenue in such terms and in such manner as may be prescribed by the House of Assembly. For administrative autonomy ,the bill seeks to allow local governments to conduct their own elections.

It has already been mentioned that constitutional ambivalence is one of the factors militating against the achievement of local government autonomy. It is contained in section7, sub -section (1) of the 1999 draft constitution as follows:

> "Subject to the provision of this constitution, the executive powers of a local government shall be invested in the chairman of local government council and may subject as aforesaid, to the provisions of any law made by the House of Assembly of the state within whose boundaries the local government area is situated and a bye- law made by the local government council, be exercised by either directly or through the Vice- Chairman of supervisory councilors of the local government or officials in the service of the local government".

The above cited provision of the constitution would portend intractable inter-government problems in which the local government is the "whipping child". Constitutional loopholes or contradictions have the capacity to provide the impetus for unscrupulous state officials to nurse the inordinate desire for hedging in the local government left, right and centre. In fact, the insincerity of the three constitutions (1979, 1989, 1999) claiming to provide a full tier local government has been a source of worry since the local government reforms of 1976 (Ogbenjuwa & Akpan, 2024).

Conclusion

To recapitulate, factors such as constitutional ambivalence, defective federal practice, institutional weaknesses, poor intergovernmental relations and unpatriotic state governments – all conspired to frustrate the achievement of full autonomy in Nigerian local government administration since 1960.Another factor

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here is the poor management of resources of local government by the council Chairmen. It is on record that even as some regimes in the past such as General Mohammed/Obasanjo regime(1976-1979) and General Babangida government (1985-1983) took some bold steps towards institutionalizing local government reforms, some of the above listed impediments were regrettably, at play.

While the Mohammed/Obasanjo regime laid the foundation for democratic third-tier of government in the country, the Babangida administration went a step further to consolidate on these gains by taking presidentialism to the third-tier of government. In bringing about the desired reforms in the third-tier of government, the administration envisaged that such reforms would enhance local government efficiency and effectiveness, improve autonomy, accord it guaranteed sources of revenue and thus strengthen its capacity for delivery of qualitative service to (the) people particularly at the grassroots.

No doubt, these were laudable aims which if implemented could have brought about the much- needed transformation of the third- tier system of government. But good intentions are never rare "commodity" in government cycles. The problem has always been how to translate these objectives into concrete realities. However, in terms of setting up structures and institutions for actualizing the goals of grassroots governance, the military can be said to have made more impact than their civilian counterpart who often are more desirous of the political point they can garner from manipulating the third- tier system than the overall goal of human development.

The third-tier of government still remains encumbered by excessive intervention and manipulation by superior levels of government irrespective of the regime in power. None of these levels of government has been willing to free local government from their stranglehold because of the political advantage it holds for them. At the heart of this intrigue lies the issue of autonomy for local government which as Gboyega (1979) noted: "what really makes a system local administration rather than local government is the degree of independence and autonomous power that functional bodies operating it enjoy". But as it is presently, the third-tier of government is a little more than a mere appendage of the federal and state tiers of government because they lack the autonomy to perform as a tier of government.

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Finance is the backbone of any organization. This is more so in a third-tier of government where most of the problems of development start. As government closest to the people, third-tier of government ought to be properly funded. However, the paternal role those superior levels of government play in the life of local government has done more harm than good to their well-being. Third- tier of government has become, since the constitutional guarantee of funding, a beggar unit of government that relies almost solely on federal and state subventions or allocations for survival. No longer is the viability factor considered fundamental to local government creation. Internally generated revenue as a factor has been deemphasized.

What has become the norm is that political decentralization is given prominence over economic decentralization so that while more third tiers of government have been created over the years, only a few can survive on their own without relying excessively on superior levels of government. This, to say the least, is unacceptable.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that in Nigeria, the achievement of a functional third tier of government with full independence and autonomy would remain a mirage for a long time to come unless something is done urgently. To begin with, since part of the problems of the local government councils is the prevalence of corruption and general incompetence of its staff members, it is imperative to suggest that the caliber of personnel at the local government level should be improved while the institutions dealing with cases of corruption must be strengthened. Furthermore, this study found that the Nigerian constitutional provisions pertaining to local government laid the basis for the unhealthy interference of the federal and state governments over local government administration. To enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the local government system and thus pave way for full autonomy status, there is an urgent need to review the constitution and delineate areas of intergovernmental frictions especially in electoral matters, creation of local governments, tenure of councils, and finance. The Council elections should be conducted as and when due, to avoid a democratic vacuum that is dangerous to the local government system. The

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political party leaders should insist on the performance of local councils rather than demanding patronage of the council leadership.

Given the weak revenue base of the local governments as a third tier of government, state governments not backed up by the constitution should not encroach on the lucrative responsibilities of local governments or misappropriate local government funds in any form or guise. Similarly, local governments should creatively establish avenues for revenue generation to avoid depending heavily on the statutory allocations. Also, the federal government should evolve mechanisms for checkmating and sanctioning unpatriotic state governments who fail to remit monies due to the local governments.

The state joint local government account should be scrapped. Needless to say, this, would in a large measure, reduce the incidence of illegal deductions, extra-budgetary impositions, under allocation, and so on. It would then become easy to lay the blame for non- performance and financial misappropriation squarely on someone's table.

It is hoped that if and when the political class at all levels purge themselves of ethnocentrism, avarice and kleptomania and make patriotic efforts to give effect to the above mentioned recommendations, the current lip service towards institutionalizing local government autonomy, would become a thing of the past.

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