The Concept of Political Institutions

Political institutions serve the people of a nation in form of governments in their traditional and modern forms which exist at the local, state and national levels. They serve executive, legislative and judiciary functions at each level and also relate citizens to each level of government in the performance of these functions. Each level of government also relates to the other in a systematic and coordinated fashion, frequently ensuring a division of labour. A system of political organisation is fashioned within which the philosophy and methodology of governance and selection of active participants in the political process evolve. In more developed societies like the United States, the rural local government is frequently a continuation of the state or national government political structure. However, the native Indian tribes had their own system of rural local governance prior to the arrival of immigrants from Europe and during the early years of European settlement in that country (Gupta 2002).

Today, much of such structures have been obliterated by the forces of modernisation which have swept across United States particularly during the last two centuries. Less developed nations or countries like Nigeria still retain much of their traditional political forms at the local level,although the modern political structure exists side by side with the traditional forms. The latter which had influenced the lives of the citizens over a much longer period than the former, still controls much of the daily activities of the local people. Unlike some African countries, Kenya did not have institution of political chiefs prior to the arrival of the British colonialists in that country. Most of the communities were ruled via a council of elders. In 1902, the colonial administration passed the village headmen ordinance, which among the other things, provided for the appointment of headmen by the colonial administrators. They were to rule on behalf of the colonialists at the local level. Japanese rural area fiefs during feudal times were divided into districts. These were administered by magistrates who were appointed by the fief government. The districts consisted of villages Mura. In the urban areas were cities which consisted of wards and villages. Wards were subdivided into neighbourhoods of five to ten houses, gonin gumi or junin gumi. The district magistrates linked the fief administration with the people. They exercised legislative, executive and judicial powers.

3.2 **Features of the Local Government in Rural Areas**

The following features characterise the rural local government in many societies:

1. **Resistance to Change**: The local government is the institution through which the local people show their political expressions, thus like other rural institutions it is highly resistant to change. The traditional rural local governing processes in many societies have remained the same over centuries. Prior to the introduction of the western systems of government in many African countries, the traditional system of government had even remained the same.

2. **Informality Local government structures and processes are highly informal**. They are governed by traditional mores, practices and relationships.

3. **A High Degree of Autonomy** The local government enjoys a high degree of autonomy irrespective of the state or national government which could be a monarchy, republic, democracy or an oligarchy. This is because comprehensive local affairs cannot be supervised by the central government which is far from the local sense. The influence of the central government becomes more effectivet in governing the area with increase in transportation and communication, although the high degree of autonomy is still common in most rural districts of the world.

4. **A High Degree of Stability** Even in terms of rapid social change brought about by the activities of the modern central governments which open up projects in rural areas, change in the traditional rural system of government is often gradual.

5. **Rule by Discretion** This is a common feature where mores predominate the ruling process. Taxation, administration of justice, maintenance of facilities such as schools, roads and bridges are informally executed. However, such traditional political institutions have been largely replaced by central governments with growing difficulties of virtually all societies.

6. **Lack of Specialised Political Leadership** Those who lead in other spheres of rural life frequently take the mantle of political leadership. In Nigeria, among the Yoruba and Bassa-nge people, seniority in terms of age, wisdom, membership of the lineage of leaders in the community and social standing, are some of the criteria for becoming the Baale or Madaki of a village ruling council. In many Latin American countries like Colombia, there is no financial gain for becoming the Alcalde (Jibowo 1992). This is true of many other rural local governments in other countries.

7. **Complement of Formal Local Government** The traditional rural local government frequently helps the formal government in implementing some of the programmes at the local level. For example, collection of taxes, criminals identification, prevention of crime, security and safety of the rural dwellers are best ensured by the village governments. In some Yoruba villages, Bassa-nge, Igala among others, prevention of crime, for example, is carried out by engaging night-watchmen or vigilantes who are paid by the village residents to help keep vigil, prevent and fight crime. The number and effectiveness of the police force is so limited, in many other less developed countries, that their influence in crime prevention is virtually non-existent at the village level.

8. **Subjection to the Control of the Central Government** The rural local government takes instructions from the formal local government, which it frequently implements. The formal local government in turn receives instructions from the state government.

9. **Lack of Formal Means of Enforcing its Regulations** The traditional village government depends on mores, folkways, imposition of fine, and similar informal means of enforcing its regulations. Although its regulations are frequently obeyed because of the existing spirit of sodality among the inhabitants, disobedient members can occasionally be forced to comply. With increasing influence of formal political activities at the village level, disobedient members who are bolstered by party loyalty frequently put the council in positions of powerlessness to enforce its rulings.

10. **Definite Pattern of Governance** The rural local government has its own pattern of governance, communication and decision-making. Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, each village is governed by a village council. This council is headed by the Baale, who chairs all council meetings. He holds this position for life. He is assisted in many cases, by a deputy. A village crier is instructed by him to call meetings of village heads of households on important occasions. The farmers indicate a considerable interest in political participation in their villages. Political gatherings and campaigns are occasions for large assemblages of rural people to meet. This encourages solidarity among the rural people. In Nigeria, the campaign meetings are accompanied by drumming, dancing and acrobatic displays to meet important political figures. Speech-making in support of a political party whose leaders are on such campaign tours is the main item on the agenda for convincing eligible voters.

State and local government level leaders of political parties meet with village leaders and the electorate from time to time to discuss political issues. There are frequent occasions for speech making and merriment by farmers, farmers’-leaders, state and local government political parties. As rival political supporters sometimes clash during campaigns, and for the safety of politicians who sometimes attack one another, thugs are often hired to protect the politicians. This is because police protection is often inadequate, and because of the design of some politicians to use the thugs to cause trouble for members of the opposing political party. The casting of ballot to elect their representatives is a common practice in many countries, apart from those in which military governments have forced themselves into political power for the greater part of the history of nationhood. Rural people vote more in relation to the number of people of voting age than the urban people. Rural people vote more for personality rather than the party. One party is also more likely to be favoured by majority of the rural people than urban people who are more likely to divide themselves among the parties favoured.

In Nigeria, party support among rural people has been on ethnic basis. The predominant party favoured in rural south-western part by the urban people has been led by the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987). Radicalism and revolution have taken place among rural farmers, particularly when ownership and control of their land is threatened. Farmers have often then resorted to violent actions. The farmer holiday movement of 1932 and 1933 in the Midwestern part of the United States, which also influenced some southern states, was an example of farmers’ revolt which sought to prevent dispossession of farmers. The land use Act (1978) in Nigeria recognised this potential danger by making provision for continued use by farmers, of plots of land which they were cultivating at the time of the Act. Farmers often favour constructive measures and those which improve their own welfare. They have opposed civil rights regulations and favoured price support bills for agricultural products in the United States (Jibowo 1989).