

GODFATHERISM, LAW AND POLITICS IN NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY*

Abstract

Godfatherism is one of the notable challenges of democratic progression in Nigeria. It undermines the quality and stability of democratic process. Democracy is a concept predicated on the free will of the masses in electing their leaders and representatives in government, through a periodic free, fair and credible election. The Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) and the Electoral Act, 2022 make provisions for election qualifications and godfatherism is not one of the qualifications. In Nigeria, godfatherism truncates the free will, peaceful co-existence, law and order and all the tenets of democratic process. The recurrent fallouts between godfathers and godsons and the struggle by godsons to remain politically loyal to godfathers result to political instability, insecurity, bad governance etc thereby messing up the whole essence of democracy. This article therefore analyzed the nature, causes, effects and the position of the law on godfatherism with a view to suggesting ways to curb the menace of godfatherism in Nigeria's political landscape. The research method adopted is the doctrinal methodology whereof, primary, secondary and tertiary sources such as case laws, textbooks, journals, newspapers, internet materials etc were consulted. Findings show that godfatherism weakens the legitimacy of good governance. That, weak democratic institutions enable godfatherism in Nigeria's politics. This article recommended the strengthening of Nigeria's democratic institutions in order to break the stronghold of godfatherism on Nigeria's democracy.

Keywords: Democracy, Godfatherism, Corruption, Governance, Electoral Rules

1. Introduction

Since Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria's political sphere has witnessed a heightened tempo in the politics of godfatherism¹. Although, the idea of godfatherism is not totally new to Nigerian politics as some of the founding fathers and nationalists such as Nnamdi Azikwe, Tafawa Balewa, Obafemi Awolowo etc laid the foundation for godfatherism which culminated into the present day political godfatherism². At that time, the essence of godfatherism was to nurture seasoned statesmen to take over mantle of governance³. The wisdom and guidance of godfathers then were crucial in piloting democratic governance. However, the birth of the fourth Republic appears to have tainted the essence of godfatherism in Nigeria's politics, as it is now an instrument through which unpopular, inexperienced, desperate and selfish people ride into political corridor, undermining the provisions of the Electoral laws and the will of the people⁴. Godfathers strategically position themselves as kingmakers spending heavily, using every available machinery and resources, including the use of violence, coercion, diabolism etc to make sure that their preferred godsons are imposed on the people in total disregard for the constitutional and electoral laws qualification and requirements for election into elective offices. Consequently, it is either these godsons in return or in appreciation find themselves perpetually indebted to the godfathers making themselves slaves, stooges and political puppets to their godfathers or there is a fall out between the political godfathers and their godsons as being currently witnessed in River state between governor Siminalayi Fubara and the current minister of Federal Capital Territory, Barr. Nyesom Wike⁵.

These problems have consequently retarded Nigerian's democratic progression, undermining effective governance. There is usually political instability, service to the people is hampered, decline in economic activities etc. Extra judicial means are also used in fighting these fracas which in turn desecrate democratic institutions and erode public trust in government institutions.

This article therefore intends to critically analyze the current issues, nature, causes and effects of godfatherism on Nigeria's democracy. It will also look at the legal qualifications for election in Nigeria and whether godfatherism is one of the legal requirements.

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¹Kalu Okoronkwo, 'Godfatherism and the Dearth of Political Mentorship in Nigeria' <<https://www.thecable.ng>> accessed on January 28th 2024 by 21:55pm.

²J.S Omotola 'Godfathers and the 2007 Nigerian General Elections' <<https://www.eisa.org>> accessed on February 2nd 2024 by 7:30pm.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Kehinde Olatunji, 'How Culture of Godfatherism Impedes Nigeria's Democratic Progression' *The Guardian Newspaper*, December 2023, 10.

⁵Ann Godwin, 'Fubara, Wike's Tango Rekindles Politics of Godfatherism in Rivers' *The Guardian Newspaper* November 2023, 6.

2. A Review of Godfatherism under Nigeria's Fourth Republic

The fourth Republic ushered in godfatherism in Nigeria's political landscape in a different dimension. The political actors and their political godfathers are always in constant tussles over political superiority. As stated earlier there have been recurrent fallouts between godfathers and godsons⁶. Prominent among them are: the Olusola Saraki and late Mohammed Lawal, former Governor of Kwara State⁷. The Kwara State, political tussle started from 1999-2023. Olusola Saraki, a former Senate leader and political kingpin was in contest for political superiority with his godson Mohammed Lawal who was at that time the governor of Kwara State. Saraki who at that time had installed not less than four governors in Kwara State, including Lawal himself, fell out with Lawal on the sharing of appointment quota and political benefits. Mohammed Lawal failed to compromise and this led to a serious political crisis between the two politicians which degenerated into the expulsion of Olusola Saraki from the then All People's Party (APP). Saraki, then joined forces with the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and fought the APP in the 2003 elections. The political crisis took over Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State. Many people were injured, assassinated and maimed. It was during this crisis that the then chairman of PDP in Kwara State Ahmed Patigi was brutally murdered⁸. Supporters of the two political parties openly confronted themselves with dangerous weapons. The indigenes of the state continued to suffer the heat of the political crisis until Bukola Saraki (the son of Olusola Saraki) won the gubernatorial election in 2003 under the People's Democratic Party⁹.

There was also a similar fight between Mr. Peter Obi and Chief Willie Obiano of Anambra State. In Anambra State, the then governor Peter Obi brought his friend and colleague in the bank, Willie Obiano to take over from him¹⁰. Obi wanted to install Obiano as his godson believing that he will tow his footsteps as Governor. Peter Obi put in his best efforts to ensure the emergence of Obiano as governor under the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA). However, as soon as the election and victory of Obiano were over and Obiano was sworn in as Anambra State governor, he began to sideline Peter Obi. That was how the once two best friends fell out. As the crisis deepened, Peter Obi left APGA and joined PDP¹¹. A similar fallout scenario played out between the then Governor of Enugu State, Senator Chimaroke Nnamani who rode to political corridor through the sponsorship of Chief Jim Nwobodo, a former Governor of the old Anambra state in the second Republic¹². Sadly, the godfather/godson relationship between the two did not outlive the first tenure of Senator Chimaroke Nnamani as the two fell out and became political enemies¹³.

In Osun State, Rauf Aregbesola the former Governor of Osun State and former Minister of Interior was the godfather of Gboyega Oyetola who was his Chief of Staff during his time as the Governor of Osun state¹⁴. Rauf Aregbesola campaigned vigorously and supported Gboyega Oyetola to succeed him as the Governor of Osun. When the political opponents challenged Gboyega's victory in court, Rauf Aregbesola played a vital role in supporting Oyetola's legal battle even up to the Supreme Court, believing that Oyetola will be his political puppet. Unfortunately, no sooner had Oyetola settled down in office as the governor than the godfather godson relationship turned sour¹⁵. In Oyo State, Late Adedibu Adelabu who was considered the *jagaban* of Oyo politics' fell out seriously with his godson Rashid Ladoja over allocation of money and political appointments. They became political enemies until Adedibu's death¹⁶. In Benue State, political squabble between George Akume (the current Secretary to the Government of the Federation) and a former Governor of Benue State and Samuel Ortom who succeeded him started, when Samuel Ortom removed from his government men loyal to his godfather George Akume. This act created a serious crack in the relationship between the duo¹⁷. In Abia State, Theodore Orji, who former Abia State Governor, Senator Orji Uzor Kalu handpicked and installed as the Governor of the State while he was in prison, later fell out with Orji Uzor Kalu. They no longer respect the godfather/son relationship between them¹⁸. Shortly before the 2023 general election, the fracas between Rabiu Kwankwaso (a Former Governor of

⁶Magnus Onyibe, 'Nigerian Politics and the Scourge of Godfatherism: The Unintended Consequences' <<https://www.the.cable.ng>> accessed on February 3rd 2024 by 6:26am.

⁷Damilola Akintola, 'Five Godfather-Godson Relationship That Went Sour' <<https://culture.custodian.com>> accessed on February 3rd 2024 by 7:30am.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Mabel Ozumba, 'Godfatherism in Nigeria: A Tragedy of Political and Socio Developmental Challenges' <<https://www.academia.edu.com>> accessed on January 29th 2024 by 10:05pm.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²E.A Oghurba, 'Godfatherism and its Effects on Nigeria's Democracy' *Global Journal of Political Science and Administration* (2023) II (2), 58-71.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Magnus Onyibe, 'Nigerian Politics and the Scourge of Godfatherism: The Unintended Consequences' <<https://www.the.cable.ng>> accessed on February 3rd 2024 by 6:26am.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Ripples Nigeria, 'Battles of Political Godfathers, Godsons Hold Nigerians by the Jugular' <<https://www.ripplesnigeria.com>> accessed on February 3rd by 6:47am.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Kehinde Olatunji, 'How Culture of Godfatherism Impedes Nigeria's Democratic Progression' *The Guardian Newspaper*, December 2023, 10.

Kano state) and his longtime political ally, Alhaji Abdullahi Ganduje, who he installed as his successor in 2015 had degenerated to such an abysmal level such that Ganduje stamped his feet on a poster bearing the image of his political godfather¹⁹. Recently, all the news outlet were awash with the news of the political tussle between former Governor of River state and now Minister of FCT Nyesom Wike and the present Governor of River State, Siminalayi Fubara over who is in control of politics in River State²⁰. Story has it that, the incumbent Governor of River state was a godson of Nyesom Wike, he was the Accountant General of River state during Wike's administration. Wike picked him among other gubernatorial aspirants and sponsored him to win People's Democratic Party (PDP) primary election and eventually won the governorship election. No sooner than Governor Fubara assumed office the godfather/son relationship between him and Wike started cracking. The situation became bad to the extent that Rivers State House of Assembly attempted impeachment process against the Governor. The state.

Assembly complex was even burnt down²¹. Commissioners said to be loyal to Nyesom Wikeresigned their appointments²². Things were going bad between the two politicians before president Tinubu intervened. Nyesom Wike accused Fubara of hobnobbing with his political adversaries²³. From all indications, it appears that the rancor between the two has not quieten, despite the president's intervention as the House of Assembly recently accused the Governor of unlawful conduct, acting outside the law because of some political appointments made by the Governor²⁴. The former Governor of Kogi State, Yahaya Bello who recently handed over to his political godson Usman Ododo was accused of influencing appointments made by his successor into his cabinet²⁵. A report even filtered that, the new Governor approved the creation of the former Governor's office to be domiciled in the government house. As new administration has begun in most of the thirty six states of the federation, the populace are on the look out to know governors who will be political puppets to their godfathers and those who will fallout with their godfathers as has been the trend in recent times.

3. Causes of Godfatherism in Nigeria

A number of factors are responsible for the thriving of godfatherism in Nigeria political sphere. First, the quest to remain politically relevant and acquire more wealth is one of the main causes of godfatherism. No governor or any political office holder wants to leave office at the end of his tenure after tasting power, wealth and fame associated with such exalted position. Thus, in a bid to perpetually remain politically relevant, they pick, sponsor and install someone who will be loyal to them and continue giving them access to state resources. These political gladiators, after leaving office want to continue to govern the state or be in charge of a particular political office by proxy by imposing their godsons who will be yielding to their demands. The relationship between godfathers and godsons could best be described as transactional in nature, a situation better described in ordinary parlance as 'rub my back make I rub your back'. For instance, a godfather will use every available resource and machinery to install his godson and in turn insist on nominating 80 percent of the cabinet members. The same godfather will use his foot soldiers installed at the state assembly to threaten impeachment against the godson should he refuse his outrageous demands²⁶. Secondly, the idea by some people that politics is a business venture is one of the reasons godfatherism is thriving in Nigeria's political space. There are some wealthy Nigerians whose stock in trade is to scout for candidates who desire for political positions but do not have the financial where withal. They pick them use their resources and influence to sponsor them into elective positions with the expectation that once their candidates assume office, they will recover all they expended in sponsoring them from contracts or state allocations.

Thirdly, the high cost of party nomination forms is another cause of godfatherism. In the just concluded 2023 general elections some political parties pegged their nomination forms between the range of twenty million to one hundred million naira for presidential election while other positions like Governorship, Senate, House of Representatives and House of Assembly were between the range of three million, ten million to twenty million

¹⁹Damilola Akintola, 'Five Godfather-Godson Relationship That Went Sour' <<https://culturecustodian.com>> accessed on February 3rd 2024 by 7:30am.

²⁰Dirisu Yakubu, 'Wike vs Fubara: When Things Fall Apart between Godfather, Godson' <<https://punchng.com>> accessed on February 4th, 2024 by 06:56am. See also Simon Kolawole, 'Fubara and the Rebellion of Godsons' <<https://www.thecable.ng>> accessed on February 4th 2024 by 7am.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Chioma Kalu 'Multiple Resignations Hit Rivers Governor Fubara's Cabinet as Rift with Wike Widens' <<https://www.arise.to>> accessed on December 15 2023 by 6:30pm.

²³Kehinde Olatunji, 'How Culture of Godfatherism Impedes Nigeria's Democratic Progression' *The Guardian Newspaper*, December 2023, 10.

²⁴Dennis Naka, 'Lawmakers Accuses Fubara of Unlawful Conduct, Gov, Warns Pro Wike Appointees' <<https://punching.com>> accessed on January 30th 2024 by 7:30pm.

²⁵Sahara Reporters, 'Kogi Governor Ododo Retains Yahaya Bello's Loyalists, Nephew other Commissioners in First Day Appointments' <<https://saharareporters.com>> accessed on January 27th, 2024 by 8pm.

²⁶A Typical Example is the Adedibu and Ladoja Godfather and Godson Fallout Who Were Locked in Fierce Political Battle over Allocation of Government Appointment.

naira depending on the political party²⁷. In such situations, some candidates who have interest in politics but do not have the financial muscle find it quite difficult to finance their political ambitions, without an external financier to provide the money and other material resources. Such candidates look for individual godfathers or political godfathers to finance their election, sometimes with an agreement to repay them or allow them have all the contracts or some percentage of the appointments once elections are won. Fourthly, desperation for political power is also one of the causes of godfatherism. In Nigeria, people who lack basic democratic credentials are so desperate to taste powers and resources associated with elective or appointive political positions. In a bid to actualize their selfish ambitions they do all manner of things including promising or agreeing to be political slaves to godfathers whose back they use to ride unto political corridors.

Weak democratic institution is another factor responsible for godfatherism in Nigeria political landscape. The absence of a functional system that makes rules and regulations which guide human behaviour and ensure structuring of human behaviour to promote law and order, rule of law, free and fair election etc. In other words, laws are made in Nigeria, but there are few or no measures in place to ensure strict adherence to these laws. Some people are being regarded as the sacred cow and untouchable especially when they are members or in the good book of the ruling political party. Our democratic institutions are not independent, transparent and are under constant external control. This is why some individual strategize themselves as godfathers, use all manner of machineries to sponsor and win elections for their candidates and nothing will be done to them.

4. Qualifications for Election under Nigerian Laws

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) and the Electoral Act, 2022 outline basic qualifications and requirements for candidates seeking to occupy elective offices in Nigeria.²⁸ The qualifications include:

Citizenship: to qualify to contest for any elective office in Nigeria, the candidate must be a Nigerian citizen by birth.

Age: the age requirement for any elective office in Nigeria are: for President/Vice president – 35 years; Governor /Deputy Governor and Senate – 35 years; House of Representatives, House of Assembly – 25 years; Chairmen of Local Government Areas, Councilors – 25 years.

Education: the basic education requirement for elective positions in Nigeria is school leaving certificate or its equivalent.

Party: to qualify to contest for any elective office in Nigeria, the aspirant must belong to a political party and must be sponsored by that political party.

A check through the above qualifications reveals that, godfatherism is not one of the qualifications for election into elective offices in Nigeria. The Constitution emphatically provides that, for one to be elected into a political office, he must be sponsored by a political party and not by an individual or a godfather. The Constitution in *section 221* further provides that, no association other than a political party shall canvass for votes for any candidate at any election or contribute to the funds of any political party or to the election expenses of any candidate at an election. The Supreme Court in the case of *Attorney General of the Federation v Alhaji Atiku Abubakar & 3 ors*²⁹ held thus:

...without a political party, a candidate cannot contest. The primary method of contest for elective offices is therefore between parties... It follows that, it is a party that wins election... In mundane or collapsed terms, we say that a candidate has won an election in a particular constituency but in reality, and in consonance with section 221 of the Constitution, it is his party that has won the election.

Expatriating the above mentioned constitutional provisions, the *Electoral Act 2022* made emphatic provisions on party sponsorship, regulation of political parties' finances and regulation of individual donations to candidates and political parties.³⁰ For instance, under the *Act*, a political party that adopts the direct primaries procedure shall ensure that all aspirants are given equal opportunity of being voted for by members.³¹ If a political party adopts indirect primaries for choice of its candidate, it shall hold special convention at designated centers to give the party delegates the opportunity to vote aspirants of their choice.³² The *Electoral Act*, also provides that a political

²⁷Victoria Edeme, '2023 APC, PDP Nomination Forms Fees Invitation for Corruption, Activist' <<https://punchng.com>> accessed on February 3rd 2024 by 7:36am.

²⁸ See Chapter VI Part 1, Section 65, 106, 131 and 177 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) See also sections 29, 84(3), 88 and 90 of the Electoral Act 2022.

²⁹ (2007) 10 NWLR pt 1041 @ p 1

³⁰ See *section 29, 84(1) (3) 88 and 90 of the Electoral Act (supra)*

³¹ *Ibid, Section 84(4)*

³² *Ibid, Section 84(5)*

party shall not accept or keep in its possession any anonymous monetary or other contribution, gift or property from any source.³³ A political party shall not also accept monetary or other contribution which is more than fifty million naira unless it can identify the source of the money or other contribution.³⁴ Section 88(8) of the Act provides that, no individual or other entity shall donate to a candidate more than fifty million naira. A political party sponsoring the election of a candidate shall within three months after the announcement of the result of election file a report of the contribution, made by individuals and entities to the commission.³⁵ The Act sets out penalties and punishments for offences relating to the finances of election candidates and political parties.³⁶ The foregoing provisions of the law are targeted of eschewing godfatherism in Nigeria electoral and political space.

5. Effects of Godfatherism

Under Nigeria context, godfatherism has negative effects. This is because godfatherism is being used as a tool for political patronage. It is a system which produces political leaders who are more faithful and loyal to their godfathers than their constituents. Godfatherism is a transactional relationship between godfathers and godsons, whereby a godfather uses available resources and influence to sponsor a godson to election victory with an agreement that a percentage of the state's resources will be accruing to him. In a situation where the godson agrees to the condition, there will be poor service delivery of the dividends of democracy because a godfather is somewhere monitoring the activities of the godson³⁷. On the other hand, if the godson assumes power and realizes that what the godfather is demanding of him is something he cannot meet up with or in bid to listen to his citizens he may renege from the agreement with his godfather and that is where the problem usually starts³⁸. The godfather will start making frantic efforts to remove the godson through impeachment. This was exactly what happened when former governor Oyo State Ladoja was impeached by those loyal to his political godfather Adedibu³⁹. True democracy comes from the grassroots, involving effective participation of the grassroots people through the right to vote and be voted for. However, godfatherism negates this whole process by manipulating or truncating the participation of the citizenry in the electoral process. These political gladiators see themselves as political demi gods by dictating who participates in politics and under what condition. They use their influence to distort election results. They use political thugs to disrupt peaceful elections thereby truncating the whole idea of participatory democracy. The constant fallouts between godfathers and godsons often result to serious fracas where extra judicial means are employed in the fights. For instance, during the Uba- Ngige saga, part of the government house Awka and the state owned Ikenga hotel were razed by political thugs, purportedly acting on the orders of the godfather who had the federal might behind him⁴⁰. Thugs loyal to the two sides use various dangerous weapons to fight⁴¹. These expose the citizenry to in security. People will no longer feel safe in their localities as a result of political fights.

Godfatherism weakens the legitimacy of good governance. The over bearing influence and control of godfathers on the government of their godsons make the whole idea of good governance weak. If a godfather and his godson agree, there will be bad governance resulting from poor service delivery because the whole idea is about patronage as what should go to the citizens will now be going to the godfather. This will make the people suffer and lose confidence in government. Godfatherism causes political instability as we are presently witnessing in River State between governor Fubara and Nyemson Wike⁴². The ongoing river state political crisis is the latest case of political instability resulting from a crack in godfatherism relationship. From all indications, Nyesom Wike is hell bent in exerting political control over River State and remaining politically relevant. If nothing is done he will make sure that his political godson is removed from office through impeachment. Their rift has created tension and instability in all parts of the state. The crisis has been a big distraction to the governor in delivering his political mandate as every step or action he takes is being challenged by the state house of assembly allegedly loyal to Wike. All these are not good for democracy. Godfatherism is a big threat to free, fair and credible election. Godfathers employ all manner of mechanisms including violence, assassination, vote buying etc just to win election for their candidates. The question is what is democracy without free, fair and credible election?

³³ *Ibid.* Section 90(1)

³⁴ *Ibid.* Section 90 (3)

³⁵ *Ibid.* Section 90 (4)

³⁶ *Ibid.* Section 88 (9) (10)

³⁷ Francis Ugwu, 'River Crisis: Intrigues, Twists as Wike, Fubara Resume Fight' <[https:// daily post ng](https://dailypostng.com)> accessed on January 30th, 2024 by 8:30am.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Mabel Ozumba, 'Godfatherism in Nigeria: A Tragedy of Political and Socio Developmental Challenges' <<https://www.academia.edu.com>> accessed on January 29th 2024 by 10:05pm.

⁴⁰ Chris Ngige, 'My Problem with Uba; *Tell*. July 28, 2003, II. See also AkpoEsajere, 'Physically I am Drained, Spiritually I am not Weakened-Ngige' *the Guardian*, November 28, 2004, 18. See also ChukwubeUzomiwu, 'Rivers Crisis: Between Wike and Fubara' <<https://www.vanguardngr.com>> accessed on February, 2024 by 9:50am.

⁴¹ This Day, 'Tension in Rivers as Massive Protest Cripples Activities over Plan to Impeach Fubara' <<https://www.thisdaylive.com>> accessed on February 5th 2024 by 10am.

⁴² *Ibid.*

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing discourse, it has been established that, the Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) and the Electoral Act, 2022 made elaborate provisions on the qualification and requirements for election in Nigeria and godfatherism is not one of the qualifications. Despite the efforts to eschew godfatherism from Nigeria's political and electoral processes, the trend has continued to thrive and has consequently retarded Nigerian's democratic progression. Godfatherism is an ill-wind that blows no one any good. Godfatherism has weakened legitimacy of good governance by constantly truncating the free will of the people to elect their preferred or choice candidates. Also, the recurrent fallouts and squabbles between godfathers and godsons affect the quality of service delivering and democratic dividends to the people. This development is not good for the growth of democracy in Nigeria. It is based on these that, this article made the following recommendations.

- (1) There is a need to further strengthen Nigeria's democratic institutions to eschew the practice of godfatherism. This can be achieved if democratic institutions such as the Judiciary, INEC and Police can purge themselves of corruption, maintain high level of independence and shun external control or pressure.
- (2) Security agencies should arrest and prosecute any former political office holder who obstructs or shows over bearing influence on governance after leaving office. They should be regarded as enemies of democracy
- (3) Political offices should be made less lucrative so that people will stop perceiving political positions as vehicles for personal enrichment. The Regulations on influx of money and financial accountability of political parties should further be strengthened.
- (4) The idea of high cost of nomination forms of political parties should be regulated. Nomination forms should be made affordable to enable people with the requisite democratic credentials afford them.
- (5) The citizenry should be sensitized, particularly the youths not to allow themselves to be used as instruments for achieving selfish political ambitions by the godfathers.
- (6) Electoral law should be amended to fix more stringent punishment for godfatherism during and after elections.
- (7) *Section 88(8) of the Electoral Act 2022* should be amended. This is because, godfathers leverage on that section of the Electoral law to spend money lavishly on their preferred candidates before and during elections. At the end they want to recover their money through several unlawful means that lead to violence.