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## Beyond Prebendal Systems: State, Democracy and Development in Africa

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By Richard Joseph

*The following introductory remarks come from the final talk in a three-part series by Prof. Richard Joseph, delivered at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University on April 25, 2012. The remarks can be read below. The accompanying PowerPoint presentation can be found [here](#), and video of the talk is available for viewing [here](#).*

The notion of prebendalism came to me fairly suddenly, in 1978-79, while conducting research in Nigeria on the transition to civilian rule after over a decade of military government. I

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advanced the concept in a 1983 article that became a book chapter; and it featured centrally in my 1987 book, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*. In September 2011, a conference was convened in Lagos, Nigeria, to discuss the book and the continued significance of prebendalism in Nigerian political, social and economic life. A volume edited by Wale Adebunwi and Ebenezer Obadare, *Democracy and Prebendalism in Nigeria: Critical Reinterpretations*, is now in preparation.[1]

In a reference letter written on my behalf in 1988, the late J. Sylvester Whitaker, one of the foremost students of politics and society in northern Nigeria, stated that he could not predict how much of a “shelf-life” the concept of prebendalism would have. After a quarter-century, the concept is no longer just sitting on the shelf. I will suggest that it is even more significant today for analyzing state, governance and political economy in core as well as peripheral capitalist countries. So much for early concerns about whether the concept “traveled”. As will be shown, it has traveled through time and space and is increasingly evident in governments nearest all of us. In the case of Nigeria, one commentator captured its pertinence by describing the 1987 study, first published in a Nigerian edition in 1991, as a “living book”. [2] Nigerians are quick to understand prebendalism because it reflects essential practices and dire consequences of politics throughout the federation.

Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan in their seminal article, “Toward Consolidated Democracies”, identified one of the key obstacles to consolidating democracy that I first sensed in Nigeria in the late-1970s: “No state, no democracy”. [3] “Stateness”, which they refer to in the same article as “a usable state”, “an effective state”, and a “Weberian state”, is one of their minimal conditions for a successful democratic transition. In the midst of a complex transition to Nigeria’s Second Republic, I realized that there was something fundamentally amiss. In brief, the uses to which Nigerians, at all levels of society, were putting the state represented a major obstacle to the creation of a usable or effective state. “No effective state”, I would now say, no “effective democracy”.

Francis Fukuyama’s, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* [4], has brought our understanding of this basic dilemma to an *entirely* new level. His second volume is therefore eagerly awaited. The preparation of this talk was influenced greatly by certain events: the September 2011 Lagos conference on prebendalism [5]; Fukuyama’s *Origins*; the national strike and outpouring of vehement criticisms of Nigeria’s corrupt and

dysfunctional politics in January 2012; and the declining performance of governments worldwide that can be attributed, to an increasing degree, to the capturing (prebendalizing) of government offices by private interests.[6] The latter process is accelerating as much from domestic dynamics as the intensifying corporate competition to acquire productive and other market assets in overseas and especially emerging economies.

Although Fukuyama's analysis nominally ends at the French Revolution of 1789, the first volume shines a spotlight on contemporary developments. With regard to patrimonialism, and its prebendal subtypes, *Origins* provides more pertinent insights than any study I have read since delving into Max Weber's classic writings to make sense of state, social and economic dynamics in Nigeria. In the PowerPoint prepared for this presentation, I devote several slides to *Origins*. Of particular note is Fukuyama's focus on institutions; on the contrast between patrimonial systems and legal-bureaucratic-rational administration in the modern state; on the creation of what he claims is the first "modern" state system in ancient China which was later repatrimonialized; and to his dissection of patrimonial and venal officeholding in pre-revolutionary France. Fukuyama demonstrates that, in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century France, public administration was not just patrimonialized but, I would also contend, prebendalized. State offices were not just appropriated and used to generate income for their occupants. The offices themselves came to be owned, purchased, sold, and even inherited. Nowhere in postcolonial Africa has such a degree of systemic prebendalism – except at the very summit of polities – been reached.

Over the past three decades, a few authors have taken up the significance of distinguishing prebendalism within the general framework of patrimonial systems – including neo-patrimonialism which became a catch-all term for peripheral capitalist polities. Having contributed to the application of the neo-patrimonial rubric, Nicolas van de Walle made a shift to the logic of prebendalism, that is, how state *offices* are appropriated and exploited, and the deleterious consequences of this practice and associated attitudes for the legitimacy and capacity of African states.[7] In his article, "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss?", Van de Walle distinguishes African "illegal and prebendal arrangements" from the patronage politics of mature democracies.[8] He hypothesized, optimistically, that the former will progressively be replaced by the latter. Van de Walle also identified what he called "the toughest question" in the politics of contemporary Africa: prospects for "*a successful transition that will include the ability to shepherd limited resources into productive public expenditures, notably in social sector investments, that promote productivity growth and economic development, and accommodative political coalition building.*" This question is key, I would argue, to moving "beyond prebendalist

systems”.

I will list a number of considerations, some of which be taken up today, and others advanced for further reflection:

1. Prebendalist systems, which I first discussed as unique to Nigeria and other post-colonial African countries, is today much more widespread. Indeed, it can be studied and confronted as an increasingly global phenomenon.
2. The rapid expansion of market economies is multiplying incentives to prebendalize national state systems.
3. The investing of corporate and private wealth in politicians and political parties has shaded into the informal purchasing of governmental offices.
4. Governmental capacity to produce public goods, and especially core infrastructure, diminishes as a state is prebendalized.
5. Once a country falls into the prebendal trap – whether India, Mexico, Nigeria or South Africa – it is extremely difficult to climb back out again.
6. Far more research is needed on prebendal processes and methods to enhance civic education and engagement, and the use of innovative communication technologies and social audits, to counteract them.
7. Authoritarian governments, such as those of Angola, Ethiopia and Rwanda, may – if they choose – generate reward systems that establish, not *the bright line* that Fukuyama speaks of between public and private interests, but one that can permit state-run or –led corporations to expand and prosper, such as Sonangol in Angola (as contrasted with the predatory morass of Nigeria’s oil and gas industry). In brief, there may be different mechanisms and capacities to constrain and manage prebendalism in authoritarian and democratic systems.
8. The role of private sector development in “disciplining” a venal state system – as argued notably by Goran Hyden in *No Shortcuts to Progress* (1983) – has returned to the policy agenda in a more challenging way. How, for example, do Nigerian enterprises, whose emergence has been based on milking a prebendal system, become a force for restraining it?[9]
9. Where state governments and federal agencies are under the leadership of reformist leaders – again taking examples from Nigeria – can the introducing of legal-rational-bureaucratic norms and methods be made sustainable in light of the prebendal universe

in which they operate?

10. “Physician, Heal Thyself” – a highly relevant chapter in Larry Diamond’s *The Spirit of Democracy*[10] – prompts a critical question: If prebendalism in western democratic governments increasingly reflect these practices in non-western nations, who are the new physicians, how and where will they be trained, what mechanisms will they use, and who will support their work ?
11. After the Arab Awakening, what are the prospects, for example in Egypt, of transforming pervasive prebendalist practices?[11]

I was responsible for convening a conference on “States, Markets, Law and Democracy in Africa” at Emory University in November 1998. On the basis of the ideas and arguments presented today, the time is opportune for a reconsideration of the interwoven dynamics

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[1] To be published by Palgrave Macmillan.

[2] Akeem Lasisi, “Prebendalism: Reunited by a Living Book,”  
<http://nigerianbestforum.com/generaltopics/?p=105549>

[3] *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1966), pp. 14-33.

[4] New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011

[5] For another of the many media reports, see <http://lordbanks.com/2011/09/on-politicians-and-professors-the-prebendal-conference-event/>

[6] This is a point I will explore more fully in the Epilogue to the forthcoming Adebani and Obadare edited volume. Michael Sandel’s recent book, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), and his contention that “today, almost everything is up for sale”, should shed further light on the prebendalizing of contemporary state systems. So also will Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012).

[7] Of relevance, Professor Pat Utomi, who lectures at the Lagos Business School and was one

of the first popularizers of prebendalism in Nigeria, informs me that his students took to using the expression “*bureaucratic prebendalism*”, with the stress on the first term.

[8] Published in H. Kitscheld and S. Wilkinson, eds., *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[9] This will be the focus of a jointly-authored chapter on Nigeria by Richard Joseph, Kelly Spence, and Abimbola Agboluaje in a forthcoming edited book by Charlotte Walker-Said on Corporate Social Responsibility.

[10] *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company / Times Books, 2008).

[11] Global Financial Integrity (GFI) estimates that the export of illicit capital from Egypt from 2000-2008 was over \$6 billion annually, placing it third among African nations.

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