

The Extent and Impact of Traditional Rulers' Participation in Partisan Politics: Evidence from Daura Emirate, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Traditional rulers in Nigeria occupy a paradoxical position in the country's democratic order: constitutionally excluded from partisan politics, yet socially and culturally positioned as some of the most influential actors in the political life of their communities. Anchored on social capital theory, this article examines the extent of traditional rulers' involvement in partisan politics and the impact of that involvement in the political process and social structure of Daura Emirate, Katsina State, of Nigeria, between 2015 and 2023. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design, drawing on key informant interviews, focus group discussions and documentary sources involving traditional title holders, party youth leaders, former legislators and local government officials. Data were analysed thematically. Findings show that traditional rulers in Daura Emirate engage in a graduated spectrum of political conduct, ranging from ceremonial blessings and symbolic gestures to more calculated forms of endorsement conducted through cultural and religious platforms, and that the conferment of traditional titles

functions as a subtle instrument of political signalling. The study further finds that traditional rulers exert a dual-edged impact on partisan politics: they serve as advisers, mediators and mobilisers who legitimise governance and reduce electoral tension, yet their entanglement with political patronage erodes the neutrality that legitimises their office, generates distrust, and exposes the institution to co-optation by political elites. The article argues that unless traditional institutions are afforded clear statutory boundaries and independent sources of funding, their political engagement will continue to oscillate between constructive mediation and corrosive partisanship. The article contributes a grounded, sub-national account of how precolonial authority structures are renegotiated within Nigeria's competitive democracy and recommends legal and institutional reforms to safeguard the neutrality of traditional rulers.

Keywords: *Traditional rulers, partisan politics, traditional institutions, Daura Emirate, social capital, Nigeria*

1.0 Introduction

Nigeria's traditional institutions predate the modern state and have historically functioned as custodians of culture, adjudicators of disputes and guarantors of order within their domains (Salisu, 2019). The consolidation of these institutions under British indirect rule extended their administrative relevance into the colonial period, even as successive constitutional reviews progressively stripped them of formal governmental authority (Mustapha & Bukar, 2019; Tonwe & Osemwota, 2013). By the time Nigeria adopted the 1999 Constitution, traditional rulers retained no statutory role in government, yet they continued to command deep-rooted legitimacy at the grassroots, particularly in the rural and semi-urban communities of northern Nigeria (Amusa & Ofuafor, 2012).

This asymmetry between constitutional silence and social relevance has produced a distinctive tension in Nigeria's democratic practice. Political actors, aware of the influence traditional rulers wield over local opinion, have increasingly sought to draw them into the partisan arena, whether through the conferment of honours, the promise of infrastructural development, or direct financial inducement (Udeh & Akpa, 2023). Traditional rulers, for their part, often find that association with political power offers a route to continued relevance in a system that no longer formally requires their participation (Adeyemi &

Olaniyan, 2023). The result is a form of engagement that is rarely explicit, frequently denied, and yet widely perceived by citizens as decisive in shaping electoral outcomes.

Daura Emirate in Katsina State offers a particularly instructive site for examining this dynamic. As the ancestral home of a sitting former Nigerian president and several other prominent political figures, the emirate has been the locus of a dense traffic of political actors seeking the endorsement, blessing or title of the Emir and his council. High-profile disputes elsewhere in the country, including the 2020 dethronement of the Emir of Kano and the removal of a district head in Katsina State reportedly linked to political non-conformity, illustrate the stakes traditional rulers face when their political conduct, or their refusal to engage politically, is read by state actors as disloyalty (Sani, 2020; Aminu, 2024). Yet, despite the salience of these dynamics nationally, the specific mechanisms through which the Daura Emirate's traditional institution engages partisan politics, and the consequences of that engagement, remain empirically under-examined.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Traditional institutions are expected, both by custom and by constitutional silence, to remain above partisan contest, serving as neutral custodians of culture and unity (Sani, 2019). In practice, however, many traditional rulers have become entangled in party politics, whether through overt endorsement, symbolic gesture, or the quieter instruments of patronage and title conferment. This entanglement raises a fundamental problem for governance: it threatens the perceived neutrality on which the legitimacy of traditional authority rests, while simultaneously exposing traditional rulers to the volatility of political fortune, as illustrated by cases of dismissal and dethronement linked to perceived political disloyalty (Sani, 2020; Aminu, 2024). While the broader literature on traditional institutions in Nigeria has examined their roles in conflict resolution, national integration and colonial administration extensively (Igbokwe-Ibeto & Ogbuagu, 2021; Orji, 2022; Amusa & Ofuafor, 2012), there remains a paucity of scholarship that interrogates, at a sub-national and empirical level, precisely how far traditional rulers go in engaging partisan politics, and what consequences follow from that engagement, for a specific emirate. This article addresses that gap by examining Daura Emirate.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This article is guided by two specific objectives,

- i. To examine the extent of the involvement of traditional rulers in partisan politics in Daura Emirate.
- ii. To assess the impact of the participation of traditional rulers on partisan politics in Daura Emirate.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Traditional Institutions and Traditional Rulers: Conceptual Clarification

Traditional institutions have been defined as indigenous political systems in which leaders are selected and installed in accordance with customary conventions rather than through modern electoral processes (Orji & Olali, 2010; Nweke, 2012). They derive legitimacy from ancestry, custom and community recognition, and have historically combined executive, legislative and judicial functions within their domains (Tonwe & Osemwota, 2013). A traditional ruler, correspondingly, is the holder of the highest primary executive office in an indigenous polity, whose appointment accords with local custom and whose title is formally recognised by the government of the state in which the domain is located (Tonwe & Osemwota, 2013; Erediauwa, 2004).

Contemporary Nigerian traditional rulers occupy an unusual constitutional position: the 1999 Constitution assigns them no formal governmental function, leaving them to operate, at best, as an unofficial advisory body to local, state and federal authorities (Amusa & Ofuafor, 2012). Despite this constitutional marginalisation, traditional rulers retain considerable informal authority, particularly in security architecture, peacebuilding and the mobilisation of communities for government programmes such as voter registration and immunisation campaigns (Osakede & Ijimakinwa, 2015).

2.2 Partisan Politics

Partisan politics denotes the system through which political parties compete for and exercise governmental power, typically characterised by strong intra-party loyalty, ideological rivalry and, at times, the deployment of state resources against opposition-

aligned interests (Sani, 2019; Vincent, Abdurashied & Yan, 2022). In deeply polarised settings, partisan competition can extend into the economic and social spheres, disadvantaging individuals, firms or institutions perceived to be aligned with rival political camps (Leuz & Oberholzer-Gee, 2006). It is against this backdrop of ideological rivalry and asymmetric political reward that the political conduct of traditional rulers acquires strategic significance, since alignment or non-alignment with the ruling party can carry material consequences for their institutions.

2.3 Historical Trajectory of Traditional Rulers' Political Involvement in Nigeria

The involvement of traditional rulers in the political life of their communities has deep historical roots. In the pre-colonial period, traditional authorities functioned as the primary organs of governance, administering justice, resolving disputes and mobilising communities through mechanisms grounded in custom rather than statute (Amusa, 2010; Jacob, 2010). Colonial rule reconfigured, rather than eliminated, this authority: the British system of indirect rule made traditional rulers intermediaries of colonial administration, using them to collect taxes, maintain order and legitimise colonial policy among local populations (Mustapha & Bukar, 2019; Abdullahi, 2007).

Successive constitutional instruments after independence progressively narrowed the formal powers of traditional rulers. The 1976 Local Government Reform Guidelines and the 1979 and 1999 Constitutions reduced traditional rulers to advisory roles on customary and chieftaincy matters, culminating in the near-total constitutional silence of the 1999 Constitution regarding their function (Mustapha & Bukar, 2019; Oluduro & Oluduro, 2021). Yet this formal marginalisation did not correspond with a decline in political relevance; rather, as Adeyemi and Olaniyan (2023) argue, traditional rulers have adapted by occupying a “vacuum-filling” role, exercising informal influence within a system that denies them formal standing.

2.4 Empirical Review

A substantial body of empirical work has examined the roles traditional rulers play in Nigerian governance, though much of it emphasises conflict resolution and peacebuilding rather than partisan engagement specifically. Usman (2017), studying Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State, found that traditional rulers played demonstrable roles

in dialogue, reconciliation and the resettlement of persons displaced by post-election violence. Umezulike and Ugochukwu (2021) similarly found that traditional rulers in Imo State relied on compromise and collaborative strategies in managing community conflict, while Abdulsalam, Olokooba, Okafor and Adika (2020) documented comparable roles in Kwara State.

Studies that speak more directly to political entanglement present a more ambivalent picture. Ihemeje (2018) found that the involvement of Nigerian traditional rulers in the electoral process was frequently associated with allegations of corruption and disrespect for the rule of law, suggesting that some traditional rulers had absorbed the alignment behaviour of modern political elites. Amusa and Ofuafor (2012) traced how, despite constitutional expectations of neutrality, traditional rulers have continued to play an important role in the political and electoral process in contemporary Nigeria. Sokoh (2018) reached a similar conclusion, arguing that traditional rulers remain influential in the emergence of electoral candidates notwithstanding their formal non-affiliation to political parties.

More recent scholarship has begun to theorise the mechanisms of this involvement. Ojo and Ibrahim (2022) describe traditional rulers as exercising “soft power” through moral and symbolic legitimacy rather than legal authority, a formulation that helps explain why their political conduct rarely takes the form of open partisanship. Adebawale (2021) similarly notes that even ostensibly neutral, ceremonial acts by traditional rulers acquire political meaning because of the cultural reverence attached to their office. Udeh and Akpa (2023) extend this analysis to the economic dimension, arguing that financial inducement has progressively shifted many traditional rulers from neutral custodians of culture toward politically aligned actors, a transactional dynamic corroborated by Okonkwo (2021), who characterises the phenomenon as a “marketplace of patronage.”

2.5 Gap in the Literature

While the studies reviewed above establish that traditional rulers across Nigeria are variably enmeshed in partisan politics, few offer a grounded, emirate-specific account of the mechanisms and consequences of that engagement. Existing accounts of Daura Emirate’s political history focus on its precolonial and colonial governance rather than its

contemporary partisan dynamics (Mark, 1978; Yusha'u, 2014). This article addresses that gap by empirically examining the extent and impact of traditional rulers' engagement with partisan politics in Daura Emirate between 2015 and 2023.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on social capital theory, associated with Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam and Fukuyama. The theory holds that social networks, norms and trust embedded in relationships constitute a resource that facilitates coordinated action and confers advantage on those who can mobilise it (Coleman, 1988; Adler & Kwon, 2002). Putnam (1993, p. 35) defines social capital as “the features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, which facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”

Traditional rulers are deeply embedded in the social networks of their communities and possess exactly the kind of accumulated trust that social capital theory identifies as a mobilisable resource. As Fafowora (2018, as cited in the original study) and Woolcock and Narayan (2000) suggest, such capital can be channelled through two principal routes: by providing access to information, resources and opportunities, and by supplying norms and networks that facilitate cooperation. Applied to Daura Emirate, social capital theory illuminates why political actors court traditional rulers, and why traditional rulers, in turn, are able to convert inherited social trust into political currency, whether through the ceremonial legitimisation of candidates, the mobilisation of voters, or the quieter signalling embedded in the conferment of traditional titles.

4.0 Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design suited to capturing the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of respondents regarding traditional rulers' involvement in partisan politics. Data collection combined key informant interviews, focus group discussions, documentary sources and unobtrusive personal observation. A total of twenty-five respondents, comprising traditional title holders, ward and party youth leaders, a former member of the Katsina State House of Assembly, and local government officials, were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, given the sensitivity of the subject matter and the difficulty of accessing some categories of respondents. Interviews and

discussions were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face, with note-taking substituted for audio recording where respondents declined to be recorded. The research instrument was subjected to supervisory vetting for face and content validity, and piloted with three interviewees outside the sampled population. Data were analysed thematically, following an iterative process of open coding, theme generation and review, consistent with standard qualitative analytic procedure. Ethical clearance was observed throughout: participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. The study covers the 2015, 2019 and 2023 election cycles in Daura Emirate, Katsina State.

5.0 Results and Discussion

5.1 The Extent of the Involvement of Traditional Rulers in Partisan Politics in Daura Emirate

Findings from the field indicate that the political conduct of traditional rulers in Daura Emirate is not uniform but ranges along a spectrum from ceremonial gesture to calculated political signalling, with the degree of engagement shaped by context and opportunity.

At the more restrained end of this spectrum, several respondents described a pattern of ceremonial involvement in which traditional rulers extend royal blessings to candidates or attend political functions without declaring open allegiance to any party. One respondent, the Chiroma of Daura, explained that such gestures, though subtle, carry real political weight because they convey community approval on candidates (interview, 2025). This corresponds with Adebani's (2021) observation that symbolic acts by traditional institutions acquire political meaning precisely because of the cultural reverence attached to the office.

Other respondents, however, described a more strategic register of involvement. The District Head of Zango indicated that while rulers formally avoid overt partisanship, they frequently attend rallies and deploy indirect cues to signal support for preferred candidates (interview, 2025), a pattern one youth party leader described as being interpreted by the community as guidance, regardless of its ostensibly neutral framing. This finding is consistent with Ojo and Ibrahim's (2022) characterisation of traditional rulers as exercising "soft power" through moral rather than legal authority, allowing them to shape political outcomes without formally breaching the constitutional expectation of neutrality.

A further recurring pattern was the use of cultural and religious platforms, such as festivals and communal gatherings, as vehicles for introducing or subtly endorsing candidates. The Village Head of Ganga described these gatherings as opportunities for rulers to signal preference without formal declaration (interview, 2025), a practice that Yahaya and Suleiman (2024) argue provides traditional rulers with a “protective cover” that allows political signalling without overt breach of constitutional neutrality norms.

Table 1 presents a sample of traditional titles conferred by the Emir of Daura on political office holders, public figures and members of prominent political families between 2015 and 2023, illustrating how the conferment of honours functions as a distinct channel of political engagement.

Table 1: Selected Traditional Titles Conferred by the Emir of Daura, 2015–2023

S/N	Designation of Recipient	Traditional Title
1	Former President, Federal Republic of Nigeria Muhammad Buhari	Bayajiddan Daura II (declined)
2	Member, House of Representatives Alasan ado Doguwa	Sardauna Kasar Hausa
3	State Commissioner, Katsina State Hamza Sule farkari	Sadaukin Kasar Hausa
4	Former Federal Minister Rotimi Amechi	Dan Amanar Daura Kasar Hausa
5	Musician Dauda Adamu Rarara	Sarkin Mawakan Daura Kasar Hausa
6	Daughter of a serving President Folasade Tinubu	Jakadiyar Daura Kasar Hausa
7	Son of a former President Yusuf Buhari	District Head, Kwasarawa
8	Nephew of a former President Musa Haro	Dan Madamin Daura (District Head, Dumurkol)

Source: Field survey, 2025

The pattern evident in Table 1 suggests that the conferment of traditional titles operates simultaneously as an act of cultural recognition and as a form of political communication.

The conferment of the title Dan Amanar Daura Kasar Hausa on a former federal minister, for instance, was explicitly linked by the Emirate to concrete developmental outcomes secured for the area, including the siting of a federal university and the routing of a standard-gauge railway, and was publicly framed as recognition of service rather than partisan patronage. Even so, the appointment of relatives of former political office holders to substantive district headships within the Emirate's administrative structure illustrates how traditional governance and national political networks intersect, reinforcing alliances between the Emirate and centres of political power. Taken together, these findings support the conclusion that the political involvement of traditional rulers in Daura Emirate is neither wholly overt nor entirely absent, but is embedded within a hybrid system of honour, recognition and appointment through which precolonial authority structures continue to interact with the machinery of competitive democratic politics.

5.2 The Impact of the Participation of Traditional Rulers on Partisan Politics in Daura Emirate

The study identifies four principal, largely constructive functions that traditional rulers perform within the political process, alongside significant risks associated with their politicisation.

Advisory influence: Traditional rulers were consistently described as informal advisers to elected officials, particularly at the local government level, offering insight into community sentiment ahead of sensitive policy decisions. This corroborates Udo and Suleiman's (2022) finding that traditional rulers in Northern Nigeria regularly provide informal counsel to political leaders during community crises and political transitions.

Conflict mediation: Respondents described traditional rulers as first responders in disputes, including political disputes arising during elections, which are often brought to the palace before escalating to formal courts. This finding aligns with Adebayo (2023), who documents the continuing reliance on traditional rulers for alternative dispute resolution at the grassroots level in the absence of accessible formal legal mechanisms.

Community mobilisation: Traditional rulers were widely credited with improving turnout for voter registration and civic exercises; one respondent observed that community response to the Emir's directives on registration consistently exceeded response to party

campaigning alone. This mobilisation role, however, is double-edged: because political actors frequently rely on royal structures to gather crowds for rallies, the line between civic mobilisation and partisan mobilisation is often blurred, a tension also identified by Okonkwo and Garba (2021).

Moral and cultural authority: Traditional rulers were described as exercising an informal accountability function, cautioning politicians whose conduct is perceived to fall short of community expectations of justice and fairness. This function rests on the deep cultural and religious legitimacy traditional rulers command in the Daura area, consistent with Nwachukwu's (2024) account of the intertwining of cultural authority and political conduct in similar settings.

Against these constructive functions, the study identifies a pronounced negative undercurrent: the erosion of neutrality through financial and material inducement. Several respondents described the receipt of donations for palace repairs or community projects during campaign periods as carrying implicit political obligations, a dynamic that a former state legislator characterised as reducing some traditional rulers to “political errand boys.” This finding is consistent with Udeh and Akpa's (2023) argument that many Nigerian traditional rulers have shifted from neutral custodianship of culture toward politically aligned conduct under economic pressure, and with Okonkwo's (2021) description of this dynamic as a “marketplace of patronage” in which royal endorsement functions as an indirect currency for votes.

The cumulative impact of these dynamics on Daura Emirate's political atmosphere is therefore dual-edged. On the constructive side, traditional rulers lend legitimacy to democratic exercises, dampen the potential for electoral violence through mediation, and raise civic participation through mobilisation, functions broadly consistent with Ayoade's (2021) characterisation of traditional rulers as facilitators of communication between government and the governed. On the corrosive side, perceived favouritism arising from politically motivated title conferment or endorsement generates resentment among opposing political factions and risks delegitimising the moral authority on which traditional rulers depend, a concern consistent with Uzoigwe and Jibo's (2023) warning about the corrosive effect of partial involvement in partisan politics on communal trust. Left unaddressed, this dynamic carries a longer-term institutional risk: as traditional rulers

become increasingly dependent on political patronage, they risk being absorbed into transient political agendas in ways that diminish the historical legitimacy of the institution, particularly in the eyes of younger, more politically conscious generations (Balogun, 2021).

5.3 Discussion

Read together, the findings on the extent and impact of traditional rulers' political engagement in Daura Emirate demonstrate a coherent pattern consistent with social capital theory. Traditional rulers possess an accumulated stock of trust and legitimacy, generated through inherited custom and reinforced by continuous, direct contact with their communities. This stock of social capital is precisely what makes them valuable to political actors seeking to mobilise support, and precisely what allows traditional rulers to exert real political influence despite their constitutional marginalisation. The graduated character of their engagement, ranging from ceremonial blessing to strategic signalling through cultural platforms and title conferment, reflects a rational adaptation to a system that denies traditional rulers formal political standing while leaving their informal authority largely intact.

At the same time, the findings caution against a purely instrumentalist reading of this engagement. The evidence from Daura Emirate shows that traditional rulers' political conduct produces genuinely stabilising outcomes, including dispute mediation and civic mobilisation, that serve the broader democratic process. The central policy problem, therefore, is not the political relevance of traditional rulers as such, but the absence of institutional guardrails that would allow their social capital to be channelled toward these constructive functions while insulating them from the corrosive effects of patronage and inducement.

6.0 Conclusion

This article has examined the extent and impact of traditional rulers' involvement in partisan politics in Daura Emirate, Katsina State. The evidence shows that traditional rulers engage in a graduated, largely informal spectrum of political conduct, extending from ceremonial gestures of blessing to calculated signalling through cultural platforms and the conferment of traditional titles, and that this engagement produces a genuinely dual-edged

impact on the political process. On one hand, traditional rulers contribute to political stability through advisory counsel, conflict mediation, community mobilisation and moral suasion. On the other, their entanglement with political patronage and financial inducement threatens the neutrality on which their legitimacy rests, generating distrust and exposing the institution to co-optation. The article concludes that traditional institutions in Nigeria's Fourth Republic have neither disappeared nor been formally rehabilitated, but have instead been renegotiated as informal, socially anchored actors whose influence persists precisely because the modern state has failed to define, or to protect, their political role.

7.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are advanced:

- i. Legislative and policy actors should pursue a clear statutory definition of the functions of traditional rulers that confines their formal role to cultural, advisory and developmental matters, while explicitly insulating them from partisan engagement, thereby reducing the ambiguity that currently enables informal political co-optation.
- ii. A code of conduct incorporating non-partisanship clauses and sanctions for political manipulation should be developed to protect traditional institutions from being deployed as instruments of political patronage.
- iii. Government and community stakeholders should explore statutory funding arrangements and community-based revenue mechanisms for traditional institutions, in order to reduce the financial dependence on political actors that currently drives much of the inducement-based engagement documented in this study.
- iv. Traditional rulers should be provided with structured training on governance ethics and constitutional boundaries, delivered in collaboration with institutions such as the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, to strengthen their capacity to engage constructively without compromising neutrality.
- v. Government and civil society organisations should deliberately channel the social capital of traditional rulers toward peacebuilding, civic education and community

development programming, rather than partisan mobilisation, thereby preserving the constructive functions identified in this study.

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