

INTERROGATING THE CONCEPTS OF GRASSROOTS POLITICS AND POLITICIANS IN NIGERIA: REALIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Using the concepts or phrases ‘Grassroots Politics’ and ‘Grassroots Politicians’ are very common in Nigeria, This is because, different people use it for different purposes. Understanding the real meaning and usage prompted deeper research. Available literature on Grassroots politics is referring to the rural areas; while Grassroots politicians are associated to politicians that are in, or directly linked with the rural people/populace. Interrogating the concepts under the realist theory brought out a more fundamental meaning of the two phrases/concepts, their usage, as well as adding new concepts, ‘Grass-top politicians’ and Grass-top politics, making a novel study. The research concluded that both the grassroots and grass-top politicians are equally important and must work in synergy for overall development of the polity. It encourages the grassroots to identify and support grassroots politicians at all levels, demand accountability from grass-top and grass-top to provide dividend of democracy and security of lives and property in rural and urban areas of the polity.

Keywords: *Grassroots, Politics, Politicians and Grass-top*

Introductions

Some words are or can best be described as concepts or phrases, because they may not be understood in a vacuum, while some are used in context. That is why some words or concepts are operationalized or underpinned to be used other than the general or normal usage. The aim of this research is to find out the origin or real meaning of the word “grassroots politics and politicians’. Consequently, available secondary data were explored and their contents analyzed.

The word ‘grassroots politics’ as generally used in Nigeria, is mostly associated with rural areas or people at the rural communities. For instance, Odo (2014) noted that grassroots are considered as rural areas, where 75% of the nation’s population dwell and engage in agriculture for living and of recent, for commercial purposes. Corroborating the above, Ibrahim (1980) categorically stated that grassroots are rural areas, or places where there are no basic social amenities or infrastructures like light, good drinking water, schools, functional medical facilities, good road network, etc. The views of the scholars above is not far from the truth as most of our rural communities in Nigeria lack major development and most of the times, they do not feel the presence of the government.

If compared to the urban centers, which are also called ‘cities, federal/ state capital/headquarters or the seat of Government, the cities/urban centers have relatively few of the nation’s populations. Such places have well developed and functional amenities to keep life and living sound and progressive. While those in the rural areas are neglected; they are mostly approached during elections; and after elections, they are forgotten again. This made the rural areas/grassroots less developed and not integrated into mainstream politics and structurally developed. This study examined what and who constitute ‘Grassroots Politics, and Grassroots politicians’ and other unfolding phrases/concepts or variables, equally important in and from the study.

Theoretical Framework: Realist Theory

The realist theorists are people that critically examined the world system, studied nations and other non-state actors and firmly concurred that in the global system, there are different categories’ of people, system of operations, conflicts, competitions for the scarce resources and inequality among and between all competitors. The various contending forces must get and use power to gain advantage or to establish one’s hegemony on the resource under contention (Hamidu, 2025).

The realist believed that there is anarchy in the international system and politics; implying that there is no formal political order. They firmly believe and accepted that the state is the major actors in global politics and socioeconomic relations, signifying that other actors are secondary. They believed that a state does and must relate with and complement each other for positive development and security, and the state action in international system determines the stability and otherwise of the global system and relations (D’Anieri, 2010).

Consequently, states and other actors need and must acquire power: political, economic, social and technological before they can survive and thrive in international relations. Some of the prominent scholars with such realist views include Hans Morgenthau, Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, E.H Carr, among others.

Against the above background, realists’ theorists have after several unfolding realities further diversified and classified their views in several realist ways. Consequently, Hamidu, (2025:56-59) explained the types and components of realism to include:

- i. Classical realism, also called or known as human realism. This theory is associated with Morgenthau. The main argument of the theory is that the quality and quantity of humans in a state determines its power: economic, material, technological, etc. Classical theorists postulated that society is ruled by objective laws, not wishes. The main thing in international affairs is interest, defined in terms of strength and power and interest of state.

The rejection of morality is required in politics and the main issue in international relations is how a certain policy affects the interests and powers of the nations.

- ii. **Neo-Classical Realism.** This theory affirmed that the actions of the state in the international system can be explained by systematic variables like the distribution of power capabilities among states as well as cognitive variables like the perception and misperception of systematic pressure. Other states intentions or threats and domestic variables like states institutions, elites and societal actors within society also exist; which can affect the power and freedom of action of decision-maker in foreign policy. Neoclassical realism further stated that states' mistrust and inability to perceive one another accurately, or state leaders' inability to mobilize state power and public support can result in an under-expansion or under-balancing behavior leading to imbalance within international system.
- iii. **Neo-realism** was propounded by Kenneth Waltz. It explains how states can survive with the crucial anarchical nature in global politics, even outside balancing. He emphasized or contended that the effects of structure must be taken into account in explaining state behavior. Structure here connotes the ordering principles of the international system which is anarchy and the distribution of capabilities across units. Neo-realism or structural realism assumes that states are largely concerned with relative, rather than absolute gains. In the anarchy of international politics, "relative gain is more important than absolute gain". This theory emphasized that power should be in terms of combined capabilities of state and not on traditional military alone.
- iv. **Offensive realism** was built against Waltz's neo-realism. This theory holds that anarchy, which implied the absence of a worldwide government or universal sovereignty, provided strong incentives for expansion. States strive to maximize their power because only the strongest states can guarantee their survival. States pursue expansionist policies when and where the benefits of doing so outweigh the cost. States face the ever present threats that other states will use force to harm or to conquer them. To be able to withstand threats and expand, states build and acquire weapons, enter into unilateral and bilateral diplomacy, engage in mercantilism, and pursue other economic policies globally.
- v. **Defensive realism** is an umbrella theory; that means, it has several components like defense, balance of power, balance of threat, domestic mobilization and security dilemma theories. Robert Jervis popularized defensive realism which holds that the international system provides incentive for expansion only under certain conditions. Due to anarchy (absence of universal government to enforce law and order) state develops their economy and military strength for self-defense against other states expansionist tendencies. Defensive realism predicts great variation in internationally driven expansionism and suggests that states ought to generally pursue moderate strategies as the best route to security.

This study therefore adopts the realist views because there are many conflicting and contending meanings and usages of the phrases of grassroots politician and politics. Defensive realism which gives room for protagonist and antagonist contention and each camps thriving to uphold and keep it stand firmly against the other is well accepted. Hence, those who have different definitions/descriptions of grassroots politicians and politics are all correct, viewing it from their respective angle of elevations, while the practical reality should also be upheld. This realist perspective should guide us to know the real meaning of grassroots politicians, politics and other issues involved as they are obtained or practiced in reality.

The Concept and Characteristics of Grassroots Politics and Politicians

In the real sense of the word, 'Grass' or Grasses are natural plant. They are part of God's creatures and ordinarily grow on their own on top of soil, as can be seen around our environment on this planet earth. Sometimes, human beings see them as useless, hence they are burnt, sprayed with chemical, because they are considered as weed that stops or affects the steady growth and yield of crops planted by human beings. However, grasses are sometimes planted by men as animals' feed, to beautify environment, control erosion, use as herbs, to make sport field conducive, among other purposes or usages.

In reality and practical terms, Grass as plants has 'Roots'. The roots are under the earth, they cannot be easily seen, they go deeper or down-ward into the soil to give the grass strength and grass get part of its food from its roots. 'Root' not only performed the aforementioned, but assists the grass in and through numerous ways. Both the grass and its roots are knitted and could not be separated easily. They are one entity, though one is on top of the soil, the other is under the soil.

Putting the two words together, 'Grass Roots' therefore is the part of the grass that is beneath the surface of the earth, covered by the soil. Roots draw water deep down the earth to support the grass which is on top of the soil. Roots are most times more than the grasses. The grasses can be burnt with fire, but so long as the roots remain, it is just a matter of time; the grass will spring up again. Grass is good, strong and flourishing when its roots are well placed, fed and intact. On a general term, there is no grass or plant without roots; the roots are very vital for the sustenance, growth and development of the grass. Interestingly, there is no plant/tree without roots. Roots are therefore vital and strong determinant of the stability and flourishing of either the grass, trees and other plants generally,

Politics is also a word and concept. It is from the Greek word 'polis,' meaning 'city state' or 'community of people'. Later, it began to be used as affairs and activities of the 'state/community', especially by the people who administer the state/community (Kapur, 2002). The conglomeration

of the entire processes of getting the State working and the machinery of the state/community became political. That is, conditions were put in place for one to be qualified to be among those to administer the polity. Institutions were created and given the legal rights to streamline human activities, quests and uses of power and to arbitrate where and when necessary. Much later, those who were struggling and thriving to become rulers/leaders in and from the community/state were called politicians.

Politicians are any person or groups of persons that aspire to be in political position, to control the State affairs and its resources. To do these effectively in the globalized world, party system was introduced. Political party is ideally an association of people who have similar political ideology and interest to contest and win election and thereafter form government for specified period.

Politicians are also human beings, within the people who by virtue of interest, perceive they have the competence and visionary goals, to aspire for elective position and to be voted for by electorates so as to form government or be in the place of authority. Politics is therefore the name of the game and politicians are the persons playing the game in a more practical and consistent manners.

Combining or marrying the aforementioned words or concepts together, we now have Grass-Roots-Politics and Politician(s) (G.R.P.P). Grass Roots Politics is the sociopolitical activities existing or demonstrating from and among the roots, which is downward. Grassroots Politician(s) on the other hand, is therefore any person or group of persons that see his/her self as the 'part of the grassroots' that is, one that emanated and is connected with the 'roots' and depends on the roots for his/her survival, strength, standing and flourishing politically.

Similarly, grass roots politicians are person(s) or politician that is either from or identify with the people at the lower ladder/stratum. Such a one start his/her politics and political pursuits from 'under the soil', as a seed and later germinant as grass, yet still intact with the roots, without delinking from them. Grassroots politician is connected with his roots, he never disdained them, no matter how flourishing he/she is or could be on the surface of the earth. He/she knows and recognizes his roots, depends on them; seek their opinion and welfare as partners in progress.

Features of Grassroots Politicians

Grassroots Politician(s) can be identified thus:

- i. Root Centric. As the plant cannot stand and survive without the roots, so, grassroots politician is 'root-centric', that is, concern with the people who are down, financially, economically, socially and otherwise. He/she never disdained and despised them like other

- politicians who only come to the people at grassroots when seeking their votes and thereafter disappears again, till another election period.
- ii. Socio-cultural and ethno-religiously heterogeneous. There is hardly any plant with only a root but each plant has roots. Each of the roots has unique features, interests, likes and dislikes and each plays vital role to make the grass or tree to be functional and flourishing. Grassroots politician recognize this, as such he/she is sensitive to the diversities in the composition of his people. He/she knows they have different religious believe system, socio-cultural activities and values, etc. Grassroots politician respect these differences, boost the positive socio-cultural and ethno-religious cleavages of his people for social harmony, societal growth and socioeconomic development. He/she sees all his/her roots as one and embraces them all, irrespective of glaring differences.
 - iii. Identify with the roots. The grass is upon the soil, and the roots are under the soil. While some politicians at the top or upon the surface forget his/her roots beneath, grassroots politician is roots conscious. He/she identify with those who are under, under-privileged, under-rated, under-seen, etc as good partners in progress in both good and bad times. Grassroots politician can be synonymous or liken to ‘a shepherd with his sheep’; they are inseparable and know each others, no matter the odd.
 - iv. Celebrates and commiserate with those bereaved. Grassroots politician is always together with his people both in good times like during religious and other festive celebrations or merriments, naming, graduation, marriage, promotions, civic receptions, etc. Conversely, Grassroots politician is also with the roots at bad or trying times like during sad and sorrowful occasions such as death, burial, natural disasters, failures and other calamities. Grassroots politician is always around or ably represented by some appointed aids or supporters and do the needful, no matter how small or big it maybe.
 - v. Meet the needs of his roots. Grassroots politicians always, even at little opportunity help people in his/her environment and even beyond, to meet their critical needs such as water, roads, educational structures/facilities, empowering of the youth and masses, etc., for them to have better life. Abraham Maslow’s (1908-1970) theory of need is paramount and critical to all people, especially those at the ‘grassroots level’ in view of their meager economic fortunes. Grassroots politicians do and will not take the needs of his/her people for granted.
 - vi. Approachable and available. Grassroots politician is man/woman of the people; as they are available and approachable, sometimes even against security/protocol advices. The interest and welfare of the electorates, indigenes are their ultimate objectives and motivations; hence they are available and approachable. This virtue can hardly be seen from other politicians who put unnecessary barricade or barriers between them and the people they claim to be representing or intended to represent.

- vii. Stays with the root. Grassroots politician no matter his/her exalted position, stay with the people under him/her. They have houses among their grassroots colleagues/neighbours, they often visit their constituency, they attend their peoples' places of worship, marriages, etc. These help them to interact with their people, hear their subjects/electorates' plights, views, suggestions, etc. This is contrary to the other politicians who claimed to be too busy and had no time to visit the grassroots or they just casually visit twice, especially as elections draw near to canvass the peoples' votes and disappear again.
- viii. Sacrificially generous. Grassroots politician sacrifices his/her wealth, comfort, resources to support people, construct some roads, water sources (like wells, boreholes), places of worship, etc. They are living a sacrificial and generous life style, which can best be equated or liken to Nigerian first generation republic politicians. Their ultimate goals were and are the unity, peaceful co-existence, socioeconomic and structural development of their immediate constituency and the country at large.

The Concept and Characteristics of Grass Top Politicians

Another variable or phrase that surfaced from the discourse above is Grass-top. Since the grass is natural or mad made plant, with bottom and top. The grassroots are the bottom, (the one in the ground) as was examined in the previous section. Grass also has it 'top' and the grass-top is or are equally important; but least used in and by Nigerians, because it was unknown or lest examined or explained in or by existing literature. Unlike grassroots politics and politicians, the phrase/concepts of grass-top politics and politician are conspicuously missing or omitted for long in our literature; this is a vital gap in knowledge and literature which this study discovered and now filled.

'Grass-top' is the part of grass that is over and above the soil or ground surface. It refers to the most visible part of the grass, easily seen on the top of the soil. The top of the grass is usually greenish, either for grasses with many branches and leaves or not. While on the top of the soil, grasses can easily intermingle with other grasses or plants. Grass-top depends and rely more on the roots for sustenance and survival. The top of the grass can be burnt by fire but the roots still remain under the soil.

Applying such to politics, one can describe 'Grass-Top Politician' as politician(s) on top of the soil; those who are higher and above the roots (voters/electorates). They are politicians existing afar, in higher capacity and above the lower parts (roots/voters). Though they are connected to the roots, but the top are practically separated from the roots by reason of their privileged positions. While the Grass-top politicians came from the roots, they sometimes see the roots (electorates/voters) as lower and they, as higher in all standard and ramifications. In other word, there is a line of demarcation between them, as one is higher than and above the other.

Features of Grass-Top Politicians

Grass-top politicians can easily be seen or noticed thus:

- i. They are always at the top. Grass-top politicians are those politicians that are often at the top, above the roots. While their roots are down, they are on the top or at surface of the soil. They are the ones mostly seen and recognized unlike their roots.
- ii. They are movable. Grass-top politicians are flexible and unstable in nature. They can be pushed by wind, men, desires and emotions. This explains why many politicians at the top change from one party to another, without their roots questioning or stopping them. Such 'grass-top politicians' are eager to maintain status quo and can easily decamp or change political party if their 'top most position' is threatened or when they felt or sense they will be demoted or brought down from the top.
- iii. They are egocentric and self-preservative. Grass-top politicians by nature and privilege are self-centered and egocentric. They will thrive to maintain their elevated position, no matter the views or suggestions of others in the party or from their community. Their egoism is the propelling force and they are sometimes too temperamental when advised otherwise.
- iv. They gain more. Grass-top politicians are on top and above the roots. They get more rain, sun, and moisture far above the roots. Grass-top politicians get more political dividend and other privileges far above the roots that are down or below the surface of the soil. These make them shine, flourish and thrive to be and remain at the top against all odds.
- v. They are connected with others. Grasses on top of the soil, easily get connected with other grasses or plants freely. In the same vein, grass-top politicians get easily connected with and to each other. This is because their interests are always topmost and intertwined. As the wind can easily blow the grass on the surface of the earth, so the wind of interests, wealth, materialism, position, can or do easily blow and connect them together. Grass-top politicians are flexible, self-preservative, egocentric and conscious of their class and status.
- vi. They rely on and exploit the grassroots. Grass-top politicians firmly hold the roots. They have and know their roots, but the roots are not too much desired once they get to the top. The grassroots hardly know what the grass-top is doing, as the roots are sometimes seen as liability and not too significant. This explains why some politicians immediately after winning election easily forget or sometimes disconnect with the grassroots (electorates/voters). The roots are only used as conduit pipe for exploitation and politicking.

Applying 'the Grass' issues to politics metaphorically; every person(s) in any geopolitical unit/entity is (are) part of the grass. As grass has top and roots, so are the citizens/populations in or of any given society/organization, members of the polity are either at the top or at bottom. As it relate to

politics, the candidates (aspirants/elected) are the grass-top; the ones that are and can easily be seen and the electorates/voters are the roots/bottom, they are the majority and usually under the soil. The aspirants/elected candidates (grass-top) and the voters/electorates (grassroots) are all important, and none should be taken for granted or be considered not too much important.

Nigeria and the Challenges of Grassroots and Grass-top Development

The demographic structure of Nigerian state is urban and rural areas/settings (Hamidu, NY). The urban areas are characterized with industries, good/better health facilities like electricity, schools, road network, and having significant populations due to numerous pulling factors as mentioned earlier above. Urban areas, also called cities/states capital or seat of government are few; they are the places where government officials and administrative offices are located. The cities or urban areas can be called ‘Grass-top center/accommodation.’

Rural areas on the other hand are known to be far from the seat of government, there are no or only few cottage industries, poor power supply, road network, absence of or very few security personnel, hence people relied and resorted to volunteers/ or vigilant/hunters associations, to reduce the high level of insecurity in the form of kidnapping/abductions. Farming and other forms of agriculture is the functional industry, and this is also threatened by insecurity. The population in the rural areas are much, yet without numerous and functional amenities. Because of their lower educational levels, poor economic strength and desire for better live and living standards, the populations in the rural areas became vulnerable and therefore exploited, where some of them sell their votes to the highest bidders (Hamidu, (2017). Most politicians claim to identify with the plights of the rural dwellers, promise them better life, or to provide improved facilities and urged them to join their party or vote for them. The rural areas can also be called ‘Grassroots settlement/accommodations’

Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, significant numbers of the rural communities have not become urbanized; as vital social amenities are lacking or less functional and some are conspicuously absence. Yet, the people kept hopping; voting and every politician claimed to be grassroots politicians or engaged in grassroots politics.

Grassroots politics in the Nigerian context can best be described as merely a lip-service; where politicians publically identify with the masses or people at the lower strata, for one’s or political party’s interest, just to get more voters/party vanguards. Such scenarios made Hamidu, (NY) to opine that grassroots politics in several parts of Nigeria are played, using the religious institutions, socio-cultural and clan/family affinities, as a conduit pipe for economic diversion, exploitations and weapons of political wars.

The aforementioned are the basic and practical reasons why there are many professing or claiming grassroots politicians and engaging in grassroots politics, yet the grassroots remain underdeveloped, but firmly dependent on the centre, without vital social amenities. To ameliorate the sufferings/plights of the rural communities, Rosenblath (2018) argued that positive grassroots politics and campaign is needed for the stability and development of majority of the people in most or all rural communities in Nigeria.

From the above discourse, one can say there are more grass-top politicians than grassroots politicians in Nigeria. Evidently, most politicians either come to the grassroots seeking opportunity to serve them and after the opportunity is secured, they remain at the top or in the urban areas. Or, when politicians are voted from the grassroots, they go to the urban centre and scarcely come to the rural areas again. Some of such politicians see their political elevations as medium for self development and to be among the elites in the cities/urban areas (Hamidu, NY). By so doing, the urban areas are more developed and saturated than the rural areas; thereby perpetuating the dichotomy of rural-urban division and politics.

Further still, the concepts can be applied in several, if not all organizations/institutions in Nigeria. In organizations/institutions, there are also grass-top members (these are leaders, at top-most administrative positions, who make and supervise decisions/actions). There are also the grassroots members, (these are the lower cadre staff, who are lower in rank, income and are expected to obey/respond to all directives/ demands), but they equally play good roles in and for the institutional/organizational sustenance and functioning.

Conclusion

Interrogating the words ‘Grassroots politics’ and ‘Grassroots politicians’ from realist perspective revealed that these are phrases/concepts used in Nigeria, to describe rural dwellers’ politics and events. The study adopted realists’ theory to literally examine the phrases from its natural origin, as plants/weeds. It concur that grassroots politics and politicians are used metaphorically; and emphasized that there cannot be grassroots without grass-top politics and politicians; as all are vital in political discourse. The study therefore married and upgraded the concepts together, as there is no bottom without top and vice versa. Both in politics and organizational settings, the relationship between the ‘grass-top politicians/officers’ and grassroots/workers is based on ‘patron-client’, ‘exploitative’ and ‘dictatorial’. This is because there is no horizontal but vertical relationship between the masses and their leaders once elected.

Recommendations

To reduce some of the excesses, challenges or dichotomy identified between urban and rural areas, the under listed are imperative:

- a. Grassroots are to identify the real grassroots politicians among them or among the grass-top and engage them. Get them materially and socially committed before supporting or voting for them into any elective positions.
- b. Every grass-top politicians has roots, they should always visit their roots, see their needs and challenges and address them accordingly,
- c. Grass-top politicians should initiate, support and finance rural projects/infrastructures for the well-being of the people at the grassroots. This will boost the health and morale of the members of the grassroots/rural dwellers, to keep them engaged and politically active.
- d. Since agriculture is the main business/industry and both in the urban and rural areas, food is needed, politicians should strengthen the agricultural sectors, establish agricultural industries, provide the needed herbicides, pesticides, fertilizes, etc at affordable price, early enough. This will boost the grassroots' economy and make them stable and enjoying their lives and vocations.
- e. Grassroots politicians to ensure security of lives and property at the rural/remote areas, by recruiting and posting more operatives, giving them modern equipments or supporting the recognized and registered vigilante groups to safe-guard the grassroots people.

If the rural areas or grassroots are well managed, fed, and enjoy security, there shall be peaceful co-existence, and sociopolitical and economic growth. In the long run, every segment of the rural society and the inhabitants will be transformed, quality of lives will improve and unnecessary rural-urban drifts will be minimized. Both the grass-top and grassroots as vital people on the Nigerian polity, will see, taste and testify about genuine dividend of democracy.

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