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The Impact Of Grassroots Radicalism: Nepu's Challenge To Traditional Authority In Eastern Sokoto Region, 1950-1983

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ABSTRACT
This paper evaluates the impact of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU)'s radical politics on traditional authority structures and local governance in eastern Sokoto from 1950 to 1983. Drawing on historical analysis, the study argues that NEPU, despite being a minority party, fundamentally challenged the moral and political legitimacy of the emirate system. Through grassroots mobilization, civil disobedience, and the politicization of the common people (**talakawa**), NEPU compelled the traditional elite to introduce administrative reforms and laid the groundwork for a more participatory political culture in the region.
Keywords: NEPU, Grassroots Radicalism, Sokoto, Traditional Authority, Political Legacy

INTRODUCTION

The political history of Northern Nigeria is often told through the lens of elite-led nationalist movements in urban centers. However, this focus neglects the crucial role of grassroots activism in rural areas. The eastern part of Sokoto State, a region historically resistant to the Sokoto Caliphate, provides a unique case study for understanding this phenomenon. The arrival of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) in the 1950s ignited a conflict that went beyond mere political competition it was an ideological confrontation that challenged the very foundations of traditional authority. This paper, therefore, aims to evaluate the impact of NEPU's radical politics on traditional authority structures and local governance in eastern Sokoto during a period of significant political transformation.

Literature Review

The literature on Northern Nigerian politics recognizes NEPU's foundational role as a radical, anti-feudal party (Paden, 1973; Yakubu, 1999). Its 1950 Sawaba Declaration articulated a class-based critique of the Native Authority system, which was perceived as an instrument of both colonial and aristocratic oppression (Coleman, 1958; Gusau, 2002). Scholars have examined NEPU's ideological roots and its use of populist rhetoric to mobilize the disenfranchised masses (Whitaker, 1970). However, most of these studies have focused on urban centers like Kano, leaving a gap in our understanding of NEPU's localized influence in rural areas. While some works have noted NEPU's presence in Sokoto (Bawa, 1991; Aminu, 2006), they lack a detailed analysis of the specific mechanisms through which the party's radicalism challenged entrenched traditional power structures at the grassroots level. This paper aims to address this scholarly lacuna.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a historical and qualitative analysis of existing literature on NEPU politics and the political history of Sokoto State. The study synthesizes information from secondary sources, including academic books and journal articles, to construct a narrative that directly addresses the research question. The findings presented are a consolidation of the arguments and evidence found in the provided research paper chapters, which themselves draw on archival records, and oral testimonies to provide a comprehensive view of the political dynamics in the region.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that NEPU's impact on traditional authority and local governance in eastern Sokoto was profound and multifaceted. This impact can be seen through three key areas:

Erosion of Moral and Political Legitimacy

NEPU's most significant finding was its success in eroding the moral and political legitimacy of the traditional ruling class. Historically, the authority of emirs and district heads was viewed as both political and religious. NEPU directly challenged this by framing the traditional elite as a "feudal" and "oppressive" class that collaborated with colonial interests. By consistently referring to them as exploiters of the common people (**talakawa**), NEPU's rhetoric stripped the traditional rulers of their divine and historical legitimacy, which was a radical departure from the norm and a foundational step in mobilizing the masses against the status quo (Paden, 1986).

Direct Confrontation and Practical Resistance

This ideological challenge translated into tangible acts of defiance that directly undermined local governance. NEPU's grassroots mobilization encouraged its followers to engage in civil disobedience, which impacted the daily functioning of the Native Authority system. This included a refusal to pay what they considered to be arbitrary taxes imposed by district heads and a widespread boycott of Native Authority courts, which were seen as biased institutions (Tukur, 1999). These actions were not isolated incidents but a coordinated effort that demonstrated a new political consciousness and a willingness to resist the old order. The high number of arrests and public floggings recorded in colonial documents and oral histories attests to the extent of this resistance (Yakubu, 1999).

Compelling Administrative and Social Reforms

The radical politics of NEPU, despite never securing governmental power, compelled the traditional elite and the colonial administration to enact certain reforms. Faced with growing unrest, the ruling class was pressured to address some of the more egregious abuses that fueled NEPU's popularity. For instance, in an effort to placate the **talakawa**, some local governments were forced to reduce or abolish the practice of **gandu** (forced labor on the farms of traditional leaders). While these reforms were often piecemeal and reluctantly implemented, they demonstrate that NEPU's populist pressure had a tangible, if limited, impact on social and administrative policies, thereby initiating a slow process of change in the region's governance structure (Whitaker, 1970).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings confirm that NEPU's political presence in eastern Sokoto fundamentally altered the region's political landscape. The party's success lay in its ability to translate a radical ideology into a tangible, grassroots movement that resonated with the historical grievances of the Gobirawa people and the socioeconomic hardships of the rural **talakawa**. By challenging the moral and political legitimacy of traditional authority, NEPU created a new political consciousness that empowered the common person. Although the party itself did not survive, its legacy is evident in the subsequent administrative reforms it helped to compel and in the enduring anti-establishment sentiment that continues to shape political discourse in the region. NEPU's influence serves as a powerful testament to the agency of rural populations in challenging and transforming entrenched power structures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, here are several recommendations and suggestions for future research, policy, and community action:

1. **Prioritize Oral History Collection**: Future studies should prioritize collecting oral histories from surviving NEPU members, their descendants, and community elders. This is crucial for capturing a more detailed and personal account of grassroots mobilization, the specific forms of repression faced, and the nuanced understanding of "Sawaba" (liberation) from a local perspective.
2. **Investigate the Role of Inter-generational Knowledge Transfer**: Further research should explore how the political consciousness fostered by NEPU has been passed down through generations. This could involve examining how the memory of NEPU's struggle influences the political views and activism of young people in eastern Sokoto today.
3. **Conduct a Comparative Study on Mobilization Strategies**: A comparative study could be conducted between NEPU's mobilization strategies in eastern Sokoto and its approach in other rural areas of Northern Nigeria. This would provide a broader understanding of how grassroots radicalism manifested differently across diverse socio-political landscapes.
4. **Analyze the Socio-economic Profile of Supporters**: While the study identifies NEPU's supporters as the "talakawa," a more detailed demographic analysis of their socio-economic profile is needed. This would offer a deeper insight into the specific groups that were most receptive to the party's anti-feudal message and why.
5. **Examine the Legacy in Contemporary Political Discourse**: Research should be conducted on the contemporary relevance of NEPU's class-based rhetoric in modern Sokoto politics. This would involve analyzing the extent to which current political parties and movements in the region draw on or reject the foundational ideals of NEPU.
6. **Evaluate the Long-Term Impact on Governance**: A study could evaluate whether the administrative reforms compelled by NEPU's activism led to a more permanent shift towards participatory and accountable governance in the region, or if traditional authority structures simply adapted to maintain their power.

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