

The Politics of Personnel Management in Nigerian Local Governments: Autonomy, Accountability, and Administrative Efficiency

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Abstract

Since the landmark 1976 Local Government Reforms, Nigeria's local government system has oscillated between demands for greater autonomy and increasing mechanisms of political control. Personnel management, encompassing recruitment, promotion, discipline, and deployment, remains one of the most contested arenas in this governance structure. This paper interrogates the politics of personnel management in Nigerian local governments, focusing on the interplay between autonomy, accountability, and administrative efficiency. Anchored in Weberian Bureaucratic Theory and Principal-Agent Theory, the study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven approach based on documentary analysis of constitutional provisions, reform policies, and institutional practices under the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It argues that while autonomy is normatively justified as a means of strengthening grassroots governance, weak accountability frameworks and pervasive political interference have undermined meritocracy, professionalism, and workforce stability. Conversely, excessive external control also constrain managerial discretion necessary for effective personnel administration. The paper advances the thesis that administrative efficiency in local governments is contingent upon a calibrated balance between institutional autonomy and enforceable accountability mechanisms. By reconceptualising personnel management as a site of political negotiation rather than a neutral administrative function, the study contributes to ongoing debates on local government reforms in Nigeria and offers normative insights for strengthening governance, professionalism, and service delivery at the grassroots level.

Keywords: personnel management, local government administration, autonomy, accountability, administrative efficiency

1. Introduction

Local government constitutes the third tier of government in Nigeria and is designed to bring governance closer to the people through grassroots development, democratic participation, and service delivery. As the level of government closest to citizens, local governments are expected to provide essential services such as primary healthcare, rural infrastructure, sanitation, and community development. The effectiveness of these responsibilities depends largely on the quality and management of human resources. Consequently, personnel management occupies a strategic position in local government administration as it governs the recruitment, training, promotion, discipline, and deployment of public employees (Adie & Anam, 2024).

Nigeria's local government system has undergone several reforms aimed at strengthening its administrative capacity and autonomy. A major milestone was the 1976 Local Government Reforms, which sought to establish local governments as viable units of governance with clearly defined responsibilities, improved financial

arrangements, and a professional administrative structure. The reforms emphasised merit-based personnel administration as a prerequisite for efficiency and professionalism (Kalu et al., 2025). Despite these objectives, personnel management in local governments has continued to be influenced by political considerations.

The issue of local government autonomy remains central to governance debates in Nigeria. Although the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognises local governments as a constitutionally guaranteed tier of government, their operational independence is often constrained by state government control. This has important implications for personnel administration, as decisions relating to recruitment, promotion, and discipline are frequently influenced by state-level political actors and institutions such as the Local Government Service Commissions (Bashir, 2025).

Closely related to autonomy is the principle of accountability, which seeks to ensure transparency, meritocracy, and compliance with civil service regulations in public administration (Ferede, Endawoke & Tessema, 2025). Accountability mechanisms such as administrative regulations, legislative oversight, and auditing processes are intended to promote responsible personnel management. However, political interference in recruitment, promotion, and deployment has often weakened these mechanisms, leading to patronage, favoritism, and declining professionalism within local government administrations (Okegbe & Okechukwu, 2026).

Administrative efficiency is closely linked to the effectiveness of personnel management systems. When staffing decisions are guided by merit and professional standards, local governments are better positioned to deliver services efficiently and maintain institutional stability. Conversely, politically motivated personnel decisions can undermine staff morale, weaken organisational capacity, and reduce public confidence in government institutions. In recent years, concerns over politically influenced recruitment, irregular promotions, and weak accountability structures have heightened debates about the performance of local governments in Nigeria.

Against this background, this paper examines the politics of personnel management in Nigerian local governments, focusing on the interaction between autonomy, accountability, and administrative efficiency. The study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions on local government reforms by exploring how political dynamics shape personnel administration and influence governance outcomes at the grassroots level.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Local governments are established to serve as effective instruments of grassroots governance, democratic participation, and service delivery. To achieve these objectives, personnel management is expected to be guided by the principles of merit, professionalism, autonomy, and accountability. In an ideal situation, recruitment, promotion, deployment, and disciplinary processes should be conducted in accordance with established civil service rules and free from undue political interference. Such a system would promote administrative efficiency, enhance workforce productivity, and strengthen the capacity of local governments to respond effectively to the needs of local communities.

Contrary to this expectation, personnel management in many Nigerian local governments has remained susceptible to political influence and institutional constraints. Despite various reform efforts and constitutional provisions aimed at strengthening local government autonomy, state governments continue to exercise considerable influence over local administrative affairs, including personnel matters. Studies have shown that limited autonomy, weak accountability mechanisms, and political interference often undermine merit-based personnel administration, thereby affecting professionalism, transparency, and service delivery outcomes. Consequently, patronage-based recruitment, irregular promotions, and other politically motivated personnel practices continue to challenge the efficiency and effectiveness of local government administration in Nigeria.

The persistence of these challenges raises important questions about the relationship between autonomy, accountability, and administrative efficiency in local government personnel management. While existing studies have extensively examined local government autonomy and governance reforms, relatively limited attention has been paid to how political dynamics shape personnel administration and its implications for institutional performance. This gap underscores the need for a deeper examination of the politics of personnel management in Nigerian local governments. The study is therefore necessary to provide theoretical and policy insight into how a balance between autonomy and accountability can promote professionalism and enhance administrative efficiency at the grassroots level.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this paper is to examine the politics of personnel management in Nigerian local governments. The specific objectives are to:

- 1) Assess the role of institutional autonomy in shaping personnel administration within local government councils in Nigeria.
- 2) Examine the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in regulating personnel management in Nigerian

local governments.

- 3) Determine the implications of politicized personnel management for administrative efficiency and service delivery at the grassroots level.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

Personnel management is a fundamental aspect of public administration concerned with the acquisition, development, utilization, and maintenance of human resources within public organizations. It encompasses activities such as recruitment, selection, training, promotion, deployment, performance appraisal, compensation, and discipline of employees. According to Xolani (2022), personnel management seeks to ensure that organizations possess competent and motivated employees capable of achieving organizational goals. In the public sector, effective personnel management promotes professionalism, efficiency, and accountability by ensuring that employment decisions are based on merit and competence. Zolak, Gričnik & Šarotar (2025) further contend that a sound personnel system is essential for attracting and retaining qualified personnel required for effective policy implementation and service delivery. However, personnel administration in many developing countries is often challenged by political interference and institutional weaknesses that undermine organizational performance.

Local government administration refers to the structures, processes, and institutions through which governance and development activities are carried out at the grassroots level. It is designed to bring government closer to the people by facilitating democratic participation and delivering essential services such as healthcare, sanitation, local infrastructure, and community development. According to Pillah & Nwobi (2025), local governments serve as instruments for promoting responsive governance and addressing local needs through decentralized administration. In Nigeria, local government administration gained prominence following the 1976 Local Government Reforms, which sought to establish local governments as viable units of governance. Despite these reforms, scholars such as Aluya (2025) observe that local governments continue to face challenges relating to inadequate resources, institutional weaknesses, and political interference, which limit their capacity to effectively discharge their constitutional responsibilities.

Local government autonomy refers to the degree of independence enjoyed by local governments in managing their political, administrative, and financial affairs without undue interference from higher levels of government. It is regarded as a critical component of decentralization because it enables local authorities to formulate policies and allocate resources in line with local priorities and developmental needs. Neebani (2026) argue that autonomy enhances local government effectiveness by allowing local institutions to exercise discretion in decision-making and personnel administration. However, the issue of local government autonomy remains contentious in Nigeria due to the extensive control exercised by state governments over local government finances and administrative affairs. Makama & Ayema (2026) notes that such control often limits the capacity of local governments to function independently thereby undermine their ability to promote grassroots development and effective service delivery.

Accountability is a fundamental principle of public sector management that requires public officials and institutions to explain, justify, and take responsibility for their actions and decisions. It serves as a mechanism for ensuring transparency, responsiveness, and adherence to established rules and standards in governance. Fan (2024) defines accountability as a relationship in which public actors are obliged to provide information and justification regarding their conduct to oversight bodies capable of evaluating their performance. In public administration, accountability is promoted through mechanisms such as legislative oversight, auditing systems, administrative controls, and public scrutiny. According to Oni, Adenuga & Dele-Dada (2025), effective accountability systems help prevent corruption, discourage abuse of power, and strengthen public confidence in government institutions. Consequently, accountability remains indispensable for ensuring integrity and efficiency in public sector administration.

The politics of personnel management refers to the influence of political interests, power relations, and actors on decisions concerning the recruitment, promotion, deployment, and discipline of public sector employees. Although personnel administration is expected to be guided by merit and neutrality, public organisations often operate within political environments where administrative decisions are shaped by competing interests (Oluwole, Eze & Mkavga, 2026). Mari & Tanimu (2025) argues that personnel management in public institutions is frequently influenced by political considerations because political actors seek to control administrative structures and resources. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, political interference often manifests through patronage appointments, favoritism, and politically motivated promotions, such practices undermine professionalism, weaken institutional capacity, and reduce organisational effectiveness. As a result, personnel management becomes a contested arena where administrative objectives and political interests

frequently intersect.

Administrative efficiency refers to the ability of public institutions to utilize available human, financial, and material resources effectively in achieving organizational objectives and delivering public services. It emphasizes the optimal use of resources to maximize productivity while minimizing waste, delays, and operational costs (Zolak, Gričnik & Šarotar, 2025). Moreno-Menéndez et al. (2026) view administrative efficiency as a key indicator of organizational performance because it reflects the extent to which institutions can achieve desired outcomes through effective coordination and management. In local government administration, efficiency is closely linked to the quality of personnel management, accountability systems, and institutional autonomy. Maiyaki, Cletus & Saleh (2025) argue that efficient public institutions are characterized by competent personnel, transparent administrative processes, and effective resource management. Conversely, political interference, weak accountability mechanisms, and poor personnel practices can significantly undermine administrative efficiency and service delivery outcomes.

2.2 Empirical Review

Anayochukwu, Ani & Nsah (2022) conducted a study titled *Assessment of local government autonomy and governance: A case study in Nigeria*. The study adopted a survey design and administered 300 questionnaires to local government staff, of which 276 were returned and analyzed. The findings revealed that persistent state government interference in local government affairs significantly undermined local government autonomy and governance effectiveness. The study concluded that constitutional and institutional constraints have continued to limit the capacity of local governments to function independently and efficiently.

Oti & Otor (2024) carried a study titled *Transparency and Accountability in Nigeria's Public Sector: Local Government Fiscal Autonomy in Focus*. Using survey questionnaires and interviews involving 132 local government finance and audit officials across states in South-South and South-East Nigeria, the study found that while some degree of accountability exists in local government financial management, transparency remains weak due to inadequate disclosure of fiscal information. The study concluded that greater fiscal autonomy could enhance accountability and improve governance outcomes at the grassroots level.

Kolawole (2024) examined *Internal audit, internal controls, and fiscal discipline: empirical insights from strengthening control systems as drivers of financial accountability in Nigerian Local Governments*. Employing a quantitative survey design involving 125 accounting and audit personnel, the study found that effective internal control systems significantly improved financial accountability and fiscal discipline within local government administration. The study emphasized the importance of robust accountability mechanisms for strengthening public sector performance.

Agboola & Aliu (2025) evaluated *Decentralization and Service Delivery: Evaluating the Efficiency of Local Government Administration in Southwest Nigeria*. Adopting a descriptive survey design with 400 respondents drawn from local government officials and community stakeholders across the six Southwest states, the study found that weak administrative capacity, inadequate autonomy, and poor personnel management practices contributed significantly to inefficiency in service delivery. The study concluded that administrative reforms and improved governance structures are necessary for enhancing local government performance.

Oluwasanmi (2025) examined the nexus between *Human Capital Challenges, Local Government Autonomy and Effective Service Delivery in Local Government System in Nigeria*. Relying on documentary evidence and analytical review, the study found that poor personnel quality, inadequate workforce development, and politically motivated appointments negatively affected administrative efficiency and service delivery. The study further observed that political patronage in personnel administration undermined meritocracy and professionalism within local government institutions. It recommended greater emphasis on merit-based personnel management and continuous human capital development programmes.

2.3 Gap in Literature

The reviewed studies have contributed significantly to understanding local government autonomy, accountability, personnel administration, and organisational performance in Nigeria. However, most of the studies examined these variables independently. Limited attention has been given to the interconnected relationship between autonomy, accountability, and administrative efficiency within the context of personnel management. Furthermore, existing studies are largely empirical and tend to focus on specific states or local government areas. There remains a need for a broader theoretical examination of how political dynamics shape personnel management and influence administrative outcomes in Nigerian local governments. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a qualitative analysis of the politics of personnel management and its implications for autonomy, accountability, and administrative efficiency.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

2.4.1 Weberian Bureaucratic Theory

The Weberian Bureaucratic Theory was developed by Max Weber and was popularized in his seminal work *Economy and Society*, published in 1922. Weber conceived bureaucracy as the most rational and efficient form of organizing large-scale administrative activities. The theory views organizations as systems governed by formal rules, hierarchical authority, specialization of duties, impersonality, and merit-based recruitment and promotion. Weber argued that administrative efficiency is enhanced when officials are selected based on competence and professional qualifications rather than political or personal considerations.

The major tenets of the theory include hierarchy of authority, division of labour, formal rules and procedures, impersonality in decision-making, merit-based recruitment, and career advancement based on technical competence. The theory emphasizes professionalism, accountability, and administrative neutrality as prerequisites for organizational efficiency.

2.4.2 Principal-Agent Theory

Principal-Agent Theory was developed by Michael Jensen and William Meckling in 1976. The theory explains the relationship between a principal, who delegates authority, and an agent, who performs tasks on behalf of the principal. It assumes that both parties may have different interests and that agents may not always act in the best interests of principals unless appropriate monitoring and accountability mechanisms are in place. The theory therefore emphasizes oversight, monitoring, incentives, and accountability as means of reducing conflicts of interest and ensuring goal attainment.

The major tenets of the theory include delegation of authority, information asymmetry, conflicting interests between principals and agents, monitoring mechanisms, accountability structures, and performance incentives. The theory maintains that effective governance requires adequate supervision and accountability systems to ensure that agents act in accordance with organizational objectives.

2.4.3 Application of the Theories to the Study

The Weberian Bureaucratic Theory is relevant to this study because it emphasizes merit-based personnel management, professionalism, and administrative neutrality, which are essential for achieving efficiency in local government administration. The theory helps explain how political interference in recruitment, promotion, and deployment can undermine professionalism and administrative efficiency in Nigerian local governments.

Similarly, Principal-Agent Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between local government officials (agents) and oversight institutions such as state governments and local government service commissions (principals). The theory explains the importance of accountability mechanisms in ensuring responsible personnel administration while highlighting the risks associated with excessive political control. Together, the two theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining how autonomy and accountability influence personnel management and administrative efficiency in Nigerian local governments.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the politics of personnel management in Nigerian local governments, with particular emphasis on autonomy, accountability, and administrative efficiency. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of institutional processes, governance dynamics, and policy issues that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Qualitative research is widely recognised as suitable for public administration studies that seek to explore administrative practices, governance structures, and policy outcomes.

The study relies primarily on documentary research as the method of data collection. Relevant data were obtained from secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, government reports, local government reform documents, policy papers, scholarly journal articles, textbooks, conference papers, and other official publications relating to local government administration and personnel management in Nigeria. Documentary analysis is particularly useful in public administration research because it enables the examination of institutional frameworks, administrative practices, and governance processes through existing records and documented evidence.

Data generated from these sources were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This involved identifying, categorizing, and interpreting recurring themes relating to personnel management, local government autonomy, accountability mechanisms, political interference, and administrative efficiency. The thematic approach facilitated a systematic examination of patterns and relationships among the key variables of the study, thereby enabling the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions and policy implications.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents an analysis and discussion of the issues surrounding personnel management in Nigerian

local governments. Drawing on the reviewed literature, theoretical perspectives, and documentary evidence, the section examines the role of institutional autonomy in personnel administration, evaluates the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in regulating personnel management, and analyzes the implications of politicized personnel practices for administrative efficiency and grassroots service delivery. The objective is to provide a deeper understanding of how these interconnected factors shape the administration and performance outcomes of local government institutions in Nigeria.

4.1 Institutional Autonomy and Personnel Administration in Nigerian Local Governments

Institutional autonomy plays a critical role in shaping personnel administration within local government councils because it determines the extent to which local authorities can independently manage recruitment, promotion, deployment, and disciplinary processes. The principle of local government autonomy is rooted in the broader philosophy of decentralisation, which seeks to empower local institutions to make decisions that reflect the needs and priorities of their communities. Scholars have argued that effective personnel administration requires a reasonable degree of administrative autonomy to enable local governments recruit competent personnel, allocate human resources efficiently, and respond promptly to local governance challenges (Makama & Ayema, 2026). Where such autonomy exists, personnel decisions are more likely to reflect organizational needs rather than external political considerations.

However, the Nigerian local government system has historically operated under significant state government influence, particularly in personnel matters. Institutions such as State Local Government Service Commissions often exercise substantial control over recruitment, promotion, and disciplinary procedures within local councils. While these arrangements are intended to ensure uniformity and accountability, they frequently limit the discretion of local authorities in managing their workforce (Anayochukwu, Ani & Nsah, 2022). Consequently, personnel administration is often characterized by delays in decision-making, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and limited responsiveness to local needs. This situation undermines the objective of decentralization and constrains the capacity of local governments to function as effective grassroots institutions.

From the perspective of Weberian Bureaucratic Theory, personnel administration should be guided by merit, competence, and professionalism rather than political considerations. Excessive external control over local government personnel management weakens bureaucratic neutrality and reduces the ability of local councils to develop a professional workforce capable of delivering quality services. As Onaji, Myom & Ugba (2025) observe, local governments that lack administrative autonomy often struggle to build institutional capacity and sustain effective service delivery. Therefore, strengthening institutional autonomy remains a critical requirement for improving personnel administration and enhancing the performance of local government institutions in Nigeria.

4.2 Accountability Mechanisms and the Regulation of Personnel Management in Nigerian Local Governments

Accountability mechanisms are essential for ensuring that personnel administration within local governments is conducted in accordance with established rules, ethical standards, and principles of good governance. In the Nigerian public sector, accountability is promoted through a variety of institutional arrangements, including civil service regulations, auditing procedures, legislative oversight, and the activities of Local Government Service Commissions. These mechanisms are designed to ensure transparency in recruitment, fairness in promotion, and discipline in personnel administration. According to Fan (2024), accountability serves as a means through which public officials justify their actions and are held responsible for their conduct, thereby reducing opportunities for abuse of power and administrative misconduct.

Despite the existence of these accountability structures, their effectiveness in regulating personnel management within Nigerian local governments remains questionable. Evidence suggests that accountability mechanisms are often weakened by political interference, inadequate enforcement, and institutional constraints. Oti & Otolor (2024) found that while local governments possess formal accountability structures, the practical implementation of these mechanisms is frequently undermined by limited transparency and weak institutional oversight. Similarly, Kolawole (2024) observed that deficiencies in internal control systems and oversight arrangements create opportunities for irregular personnel practices and administrative inefficiencies.

The effectiveness of accountability mechanisms is therefore dependent not only on their existence but also on their enforcement. Where accountability structures function effectively, they promote merit-based recruitment, discourage favoritism, and enhance professionalism within public institutions. Conversely, weak accountability systems allow political actors to manipulate personnel processes for personal or partisan interests. Principal-Agent Theory underscores the importance of monitoring and oversight in ensuring that public officials act in accordance with organizational objectives. Accordingly, strengthening accountability mechanisms remains essential for improving personnel administration and promoting responsible governance within Nigerian local governments.

4.3 Politicized Personnel Management, Administrative Efficiency, and Grassroots Service Delivery

One of the most persistent challenges confronting local government administration in Nigeria is the politicization of personnel management. Personnel decisions relating to recruitment, promotion, transfer, and discipline are often influenced by political actors seeking to consolidate power, reward loyal supporters, or extend control over administrative institutions. Mari & Tanimu (2025) argues that personnel administration in public organizations frequently reflects broader political struggles over power and resource allocation. In the Nigerian local government system, political patronage has become a recurring feature of personnel management, often resulting in appointments that prioritize political loyalty over competence and professional qualifications.

The implications of politicized personnel management for administrative efficiency are significant. Merit-based personnel systems are designed to ensure that qualified and competent individuals occupy positions within public institutions. However, when recruitment and promotion decisions are influenced by political considerations, organizational effectiveness is often compromised. Oluwasanmi (2025) found that politically motivated appointments contribute to poor workforce quality, reduced staff morale, and declining institutional performance. Similarly, Tunji and Abideen (2025) reported that weak personnel management practices and political interference significantly undermine administrative efficiency and limit the capacity of local governments to provide quality public services.

The consequences of administrative inefficiency are particularly evident in grassroots service delivery. Local governments are expected to provide essential services such as primary healthcare, environmental sanitation, rural infrastructure, and community development programmes. However, inefficient personnel systems often result in poor coordination, low productivity, and inadequate service provision. Oluwole, Eze & Mkavga (2026) maintained that politicised personnel administration weakens institutional capacity by discouraging professionalism and reducing accountability. Consequently, citizens experience delays, poor-quality services, and declining confidence in local government institutions. To improve service delivery outcomes, personnel administration must be insulated from excessive political interference and anchored on principles of merit, professionalism, and accountability. Such reforms would enhance administrative efficiency and strengthen the capacity of local governments to fulfill their developmental responsibilities at the grassroots level.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study examined the politics of personnel management in Nigerian local governments with a focus on the interplay between institutional autonomy, accountability, and administrative efficiency. The analysis revealed that personnel administration within local governments is significantly influenced by the degree of autonomy available to local councils and the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms. While autonomy is necessary for responsive and efficient personnel administration, accountability remains essential for ensuring transparency, professionalism, and adherence to established administrative standards. The study further established that persistent political interference in personnel matters undermines meritocracy, weakens institutional capacity, and negatively affects service delivery at the grassroots level. Therefore, achieving administrative efficiency in Nigerian local governments requires a balanced framework that promotes both institutional autonomy and effective accountability in personnel management.

5.2 Recommendations

- 1) Government should implement reforms that grant local government's greater administrative discretion in personnel matters, particularly in the areas of recruitment, promotion, deployment, and discipline, while minimizing undue political interference from external actors.
- 2) Existing accountability frameworks, including Local Government Service Commissions, internal audit units, and legislative oversight mechanisms, should be strengthened through stricter enforcement of regulations, improved transparency, and regular monitoring of personnel management processes.
- 3) Local governments should adopt and consistently enforce merit-based recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation systems to promote professionalism, improve workforce quality, enhance administrative efficiency, and strengthen service delivery at the grassroots level.

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