

**THE GENERAL EXPLICATIONS OF THE NATURE OF POLITICAL
PARTIES, ELECTORAL RULES AND PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY AND
DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA**

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INTRODUCTION

For any keen observer of event in Nigeria, it may not be far-fetched to argue that reversals and disruptions have over the years been the defining character of Nigeria's political life. Perspectives exists that link such manifestations of instability as persistent conflicts, unrests and leadership turnover against the background of myriad of reasons and difficulties. It is true, for example, that efforts are normally made to link systematic breakdown of the problems of leadership (o'Donnel and Schmitter, 1986; Ali Kazancigil, 1997). Other explanation attribute the political malaise to the inherent weakness of the manner by which the country came into existence, the weakness of the existing political institutions as well as the fragility of the civil society (Bert A. Rockman, 1997; and Larry Dramond, et.al 1987). Notwithstanding variations in interpretations, it is the dominant paradigm that political instability, or better still, the failure to effectively institute and consolidate democracy in the country, is attributable to some of the variable mentioned above.

Our contention in this work is that over the period since independence, the country has witnessed the systematic erosion of those elements in the general society that are considered desirable for the enthronement of democratic governance. Precisely, such essential of democracy as political participation, electoral competition, and respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, among others, have been systematically denigrated by different governmental policies and actions. Specifically, we intend to argue that given the events that unfolded in Nigeria's march to democracy over the years, and especially in the tumultuous years of the transition to democracy in the Gen. Ibrahim Babangida's year and beyond, (for instance, the experience of fourth republic (1999 – 2003) there is ample cause to believe that the fragility in the political party institution of society, as well as its interface with the regime of obnoxious rules in the electoral process,

account for the apparent lack of coherence in the democratic project in the country. In other words, any attempt to come to grips with the why(s) of democratic stress in the country, must necessarily consider the issue of the interface between the party system thriving in the country, the effect of rules and procedures guiding electoral contest and the success or failure of democracy and democratic governance.

We shall proceed by dividing this paper into four sections: section one is the introduction, the second is on political parties, party system and the democratic project, section three addresses the issue of electoral rules and the electoral process while section four concludes the paper.

POLITICAL PARTIES, PARTY SYSTEM AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROJECT.

Political parties are essential features of the democratic arrangement. Defined as “an organized group with a clearly defined policy whose main aim is to win or retain political power (Ujo, A. A., 2000:98) political parties aggregate and articulate the disparate views of a country’s population for effective political actions/indications. Being essentially important to the vitality and viability of the democratic forms of governance, not a few scholars have at any one time argued for the desirability of a strongly institutionalized party system for the flourishing of the democratic ethos in societies. As argued by Oyeleye Oyediran and Adigun Agbaje (1991:1:216), for instance, the longevity and vitality of democracy owes much to the ability of the party system in place to aggregate freely, articulate, respect and organize set limits in the quest for the use of political powers. Obviously, too is the fact that for the party system to be capable of discharging these roles effectively, require the meeting of criteria as autonomy, complexity and coherence (Lynne Ragodale and John J. Theis 1997).

In this respect, too, Richard Vengroff’s (1994a&b) argument becomes especially relevant.

Drawing from the experience of Mali, Vengroff has asserted that the degree to which a party system is able to meaningfully contribute to the political process is related to the existence of several factors: the development and maintenance of strong party organization with the depth and breadth necessary for their operation and the degree of institutionalization of the party as indicated by its historical roots, longevity, survival and continuing support. The ability to meet these conditions, according to him, is “indicative of their strength, their future survival and success and their potential contribution to the institutionalization of democratic government”.

Where the above form the essential for the measurement of the party system in Nigeria, it then becomes logical to hold that the key party institution in the country seldom fulfils

its functions. Over the years since Nigeria engage in the democratic project, what becomes discernible is the lack of proper organization of the political party system. Rather, the general tendency is one in which the party structures in the society are established mainly on ethnicization, regionalization, and patrimonilization of power. Indeed, as records have tended to show, even as the records of inter and intra-party squabbles of second and especially fourth republic of late depict, both in their methods and practices, the country's political parties have contributed immensely to the crises that currently engulfs the political system. However, we must proceed with caution in order not to suggest that the party structures are/or organizations are, in and of themselves, the key determinants of democratic stability. Rather, as Rome Aniyowoshe (1982:22) contends:

The establishment of a strong party system does not necessarily remove the potential for violent political conflict, especially between different ethnic groups within a political system: the determining factors are likely to be the discontents and loyalties of the members of the political parties and most especially the nature and types of relations between the ruling and opposition parties. Where an elite in power does not have a live-and-let live attitude its opponent out of power, and the latter are consistently oppressed and victimized, a party system may actually become a source of violent political conflict. In particular, opposition parties are likely to direct their organizational activities such as subversion.

Perhaps, an important variable that must, of necessary be taken into account in explaining practices in the country's party system remains the tendency on the part of the parties to hardly recognize one another as legitimate representatives of opposing groups and therefore to continuously split and resort to mutual recriminations on every imaginable issue.

As Verba et. al(1981:208) discovers, such antagonisms and deadly conflicts usually result where:

One party resents advantages held by another and the other party struggles to preserve them. Or each party perceives the other to be advantaged, in which case the redress that each seeks makes the other feel even more disadvantaged. Such political conflict can be about any kinds of advantages

In Nigeria, surely, the killing, arson and other forms of political violence that characterizes political competition, no less exemplified by happenings before and during the April 2003 elections, gives a clear indication that intense, conscious and deliberate negotiations towards the settlement of disputes was never part of the party system. Indeed, in Nigeria, recent elections as the previous ones, serve to leave no one in doubt that both the elites and their party structures are patently wanting in the essential requisites that may foster accommodation and political compromise. For instance, during

the party primary season the early 2003 politicians begin jockeying for position. Inter-party rivalries emerged as a significant source of conflict, sparking violence in a number of areas. Results from many primary races were contested in court and on the streets. Indeed, the lop-sidedness of the processes that tend to reward victory and marginalize the loser, as exemplified in E. Gyimah Boadi's (1998:19) "crude majoritarianism", precludes the possibility of the flourishing of any positive approach to political contestation necessarily becomes a zero-sum affair with little or no regards for the laid down procedures. Such intransigence and bellicosity has been very contributive to the failure to develop a durable political party in the country.

ELECTORAL RULES AND ELECTORAL PROCESS

It perhaps, tantamount to stating obvious, to argue that over the years, politics and particularly the electoral process in Nigeria have been beset by series of problems. These range from excessive state control and interference, application of unpopular, often unorthodox methods and procedures and many other unfavourable conditions. Except, of course, for the arrangement which ushered in the second republic in 1979, all subsequent attempts tended to suffer from severe setbacks occasioned largely by the manipulative devices of the government overseeing their implementation. In fact, while the government of Murtala/Obasanjo allowed a great deal of independent action on the part of the regulatory body, the then Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), the same cannot be said of the several attempts by its successors. INEC's performance leading up to and during April 12 National Assembly Election made it the object of significant criticism for its perceived lack of independence from the executive branch of government, and for a wide range of institutional and professional shortcomings. Emphatically, National Democratic Institute's International Observer Delegation, notes that there were irregularities committed by officials, activists and supporters of the major political parties. INEC demonstrated an inability to ensure the overall secrecy and security to the voting and counting process. This appeared to have severely limited, and even denied in some parts of the country, the ability of Nigerians to express their franchise during both the National Assembly and the presidential/ Gubernatorial elections (Daily Trust, 4).

Specifically, the Babangida REGIME, which run the country from 1985 – 1993 has been widely viewed as notorious for its incessant interference with the political transition process more especially the polls that were held under its close supervision. Basing its meddlesomeness on what it processed to be the need to sanitize the political system of violence, corruption and other vices, the government dabbled fully into all aspects of the political process, setting rules, changing them at random and excluding certain segments of the population from competing for elective positions. However, laudable as the stated intentions were, many observers were of the conviction that the unsurpassed meddlesomeness of the state into what should ordinarily belong on the citizen's

constitutional prerogatives could be held to account for the crises and uncertainties that bedevilled the Babangida's transition programme, especially the party and electoral system which were reduced to mere charades.

The point therefore remains that electoral rules are not unknown in Nigeria. Coupled with administrative forces and even laxity, they often pose significant barriers to effectively participation (Geraint Parry and G. Noyser, 1994; and Robert H. Blank, 1973). In Nigeria, this was particularly true of the lapses and gross inefficiencies attributable to the implementers of the electoral process. Specifically, voter registration exercises in the country were almost always plagued by confusion delays and abuses of various dimensions.

Nigeria's experience, thus seem to suggest that a student variable that negatively impinges on the electoral process includes the official requirement or guidelines affecting the political parties and candidates. Often, political associations seeking constitutional recognition or registration are required to fulfil certain stringent conditions including the payment of some non-refundable fee. Other requirements such as opening of party offices nation-wide, manning them with personnel at all level made it imperative for associations seeking eligibility to incur expenditures running into several millions of Naira (Babafemi A. Badejo, 1997:177). If anything, perhaps, these conditions contributed to opening the floodgate for the domineering role of 'money bags' in the country's electoral process. Ironically, therefore, the much publicized aversion to the salience of money in Nigeria's electoral process is no more than hypocritical. Indeed, the spill over effects of the aforementioned conditions are quite manifest at all levels of society with shady and illiberal practices beclouding the electoral process. Part of the repercussions are that, at the level of the electorates specifically, acute poverty, inflations, unemployment and other harsh conditions of life ensured the voters openly demand and receive inducements from the parties and their agents. This has been widely attested to in the recent elections in the country.

Generally, the point being emphasized here is that several constraints stand in the way of consolidation of Nigeria's democratic project. Of this, the undemocratic and illiberal behaviour or disposition of the political elites and their parties are of central concern.

As Diamond (1996: 7) asserts:

Consolidation is obstructed or destroyed casually by the effects of institutional shallowness and decay. If they are to become consolidated, therefore, electoral democracy must become deeper and more liberal. This will require grater executive (and military) accountability to both the low and the scrutiny of other branches of government as well as the public, the reduction of barriers to political participation and mobilization by marginalized groups; and more

effective protection for the political and civil rights of all citizens. Deepening will also be facilitated by the institutionalization of a political party system that stimulates mass participation, incorporate marginalized groups and forges vibrant linkages with civil society organizations and party branches and officials at the local levels. (Emphasis Ours).

In other words, absence of effective party system and the prevalence of other weak and/or fledgling political institutions, often stand in the way of enduring democratic governance (Schmitter, 1994; and Mcfaul, 1999).

CONCLUSION

We have shown in the preceding discussions that Nigeria's Journey to democracy have been beset by a number of problems. Part of the problems lie in the inability of the state to ensure the flourishing of such arrangement as well ensure the unimpedance attainment of the democratic goals of society. As our analysis has indicated, the nature and character of the political party system that the country practices over the years, has been instrumental in the derailment of many of the attempts at democratic sanitation in the country. Not only were the party system fluid, lacking in coherence and generally shallow, but the intra and inter-party feuds that become common place on the political landscape, necessarily define the textures and content or politics the continues witnesses thus far.

Indeed, events that unfolded in the latest electoral contest in the country suggest that there is a long way ahead for the country in the search for democratic sustenance. The series of crises that dotted the electoral process and the anxiety it created in the political system were quite alarming. For the health of Nigerian's democracy and deliberate efforts on the part of the state and its agencies, geared towards not only ensuring a hitch-free electoral process, but the institutionalization of the party system that is necessary for democratic vitality and stability.

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Daily Trust Newspaper, April 22, 2003.