

PARTY SYSTEM AND POLITICAL PARTIES AS THREATS TO DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Nigerian party system with particular focus on the place of political parties in the democratic process of the fourth republic. Using data collected from both primary and secondary sources the paper argues that instead of strengthening the democratic experience, the party system in Nigeria with the several political parties in the political fray have rather constituted a threat to the smooth running of government and the entire democratic system. At once implicit and explicit, there are too many un-functioning and ineffective political parties in Nigeria; so also there are no clear ideological differences in the numerous political parties, that is even if there exist any fundamental ideology in any of the present Nigerian political parties at all. Perhaps more worrisome is the pattern or trend of Party formation in Nigeria; which has been designed and characterized by alliance and reliance of politicians with no other intensions in mind than to look for avenue to remain politically relevant by either cross-carpeting to another party or coalescing into a new party. The paper concludes that there is the need to redesign the party system and streamline the numbers of political parties through institutional

mechanisms in order to sustain the Nigerian democracy. Of Particular and immediate imperative, the paper recommends, a strong and virile opposition party in Nigeria that has the strength and structure to effectively compete for political power for smooth successive civilian to civilian democratic governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Party system, Political ideology, Multiplicity, Good governance.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is essentially a system of government in which the people control decision making. It is a system of government that ensures that power actually belongs to the people (Omotola 2006). According to Schumpeter democracy entails “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions, which realizes the common good by making the people decide issues through the election of individuals, who are to assemble in order to carry out its will” (in Omotola 2006:27). It is an “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide, by means of a competitive struggle for the peoples vote (Omotola 2006:27). Democracy therefore from the perspective of this paper is viewed as a governmental process which encompasses the competitiveness for power in order to control political decisions in an atmosphere where civil liberties are exercised.

The place of political parties in any democratic government cannot be over emphasized because of their instrumentality in ordering the political system; structuring the political process and ensuring that citizen participation in that process is orderly (Huntington,68; Bello, 2012).

CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

Political Party

A political party is an organized group of people with at least roughly similar political aims and opinions that seek to influence the public, policy by getting its candidate elected to public office (Likoti, 2005). Edmund Burke defined political party as a body of men united for promoting their joint endeavours that national interests upon some particular principles in which they all agreed (Ojo, 2009). The existence of political parties according to this definition must be based on the principles of promoting national interest. This is because political parties are often expected to have their membership spread across the country. This explain, for instance, why Nigerian constitution required parties to reflect federal character before they can be registered (Tordoff, 1999). Similarly, Osumah (2009) opines that a political party is a voluntary association organized by persons bind by common interests or aims, which seeks to acquire or retain power through the election of its candidates into public office. Here political party was perceived as an instrument of acquiring political power in order to implement government policies.

Political Parties are integral part of the process of institutionalizing democracy. Thus, political parties according to IDEA (2000) produce the candidates, set the parameters of issues and agenda within which elections are to be held and they are expected to perform these duties periodically. The, functions of a political party were summarized by Carr (cited

in Egbewole and Muhtar, 2010) as: (i) Stimulating the citizenry to take a greater interest in election and activities of government. (ii) Defining political issues of the day and sharpen the choice between alternative paths. (iii) Presenting candidates who are committed to announce position with respect to issues. (iv) Majority party provides basis upon which government can be operated. (v) Accepting responsibility to govern upon winning election.

In addition, Political Parties, according to Huntington (1968), perform the functions of ordering the political system; they serve to structure political process and ensure that citizen participation in that process is orderly; they seek to provide a distinctive collective identify for their followers, one that is premised upon acceptance of basic rules of the national political arena. As a result of these functions, Diamond (1997) asserted that: Political parties remain important if not essential instruments for representing political constituencies and interests, aggregating demands and preferences, recruiting and socializing new candidate for office; organizing the electoral competition for power, crafting policy alternatives, setting the policy-making agenda, forming effective governments, and integrating groups and individuals into the democratic process. In order to perform these functions positively, political party should be guided by distinctive ideology which will sell them to a core set of electorates and distinguish them clearly from other political parties. At this juncture, ideology becomes important feature of political parties. Party ideology constitutes the political doctrine from which a programme of political actions emanates and on which basis citizens choose how they will like to be ruled (Sambine, 2004). In his opinion, Nnoli (2003) posited that ideology is very important aspect of politics, not only by serving as a cognitive structure for looking at society generally and providing a guide to individual action and judgment, but as a powerful instrument of conflict management, self-identification, popular mobilization and legitimization. The party's policies plus strategies for achieving them and code of conduct for party members are encapsulated in the ideology which the party hold in high esteem. On this basis, Simbine (2005) posited that parties and their manifestoes need to espouse the ideology on which they plan to run the government in order to give the electorates a clear picture of where the country is heading to and to decide whether or not to work in that direction. Absence of ideology in parties will therefore make it difficult for political parties to harmonize members view on political issues relating to the governance of their political community.

Party System

Party system is a cardinal and pivotal apparatus in the democratic settings and good governance of any worthy exemplary political institution (Musa, 2005). It can be perceived as cycles of interaction inherent among political parties electoral, parliamentary and governmental arenas of a given political circumstances. In many nations, parties play a crucial role in the democratic process. They formulate political and policy agendas, select candidates, conduct election campaigns, and monitor the work of their elected representatives. Political parties link citizens and the government, providing a means by which people can have a voice in their government.

Party system refers to a political platform in which the mobilization, formation and contestation of political parties is a means of constituting political orders in a democratic state. Scholars have defined party system as consisting of dynamic conglomeration of a society's politically dynamic agent for the sole purpose of managing the instrumentalities of government (Nwankwo, 1982). Party systems may be broken down into three broad categories: two-party, multiparty, and single-party. Such a classification is based not merely on the number of parties operating within a particular country but on a variety of distinctive features that the three systems exhibit. Two-party and multiparty systems represent means of organizing political conflict within pluralistic societies and are thus part of the apparatus of democracy. Single parties usually operate in situations in which genuine political conflict is not tolerated. This broad statement is, however, subject to qualification, for, although single parties do not usually permit the expression of points of view that are fundamentally opposed to the party line or ideology, there may well be intense conflict within these limits over policy within the party itself. And even within a two-party or a multiparty system, debate may become so stymied and a particular coalition of interests so entrenched that the democratic process is seriously compromised.

THE NIGERIAN POLITICAL PARTIES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The development of political parties in Nigeria dates back to 1923 when the Nigerian National Democratic Party was launched. This followed the establishment of the Nigerian Legislative Council to provide some political space for the participation of indigenes. Franchise was however limited to two cities - Lagos and Calabar. A more vigorous process of party formation was initiated with the formation of the Nigerian Youth Movement in 1938 and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in 1944 under the leadership of Herbert Macaulay. The Action Group (AG) emerged in 1948 while the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) was established in 1951. These parties constituted themselves as political expressions of ethno-regional associations with the Action Group in the West evolving from a Yoruba cultural association – Egbe Omo Oduduwa, the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) evolving from the northern cultural association, Jamiyar Mutanen Arewa and the National Congress of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) which started as a national party but later narrowed its social base to a cultural association, the Igbo State Union of the south east. These ethno-regional elite blocs struggled against each other in configuring the politics of the First Republic as a contest for hegemony by the elites of the major ethnic formations – Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo and the marginalisation of the minority groups. Massive electoral fraud in the 1964 and 1965 elections precipitated a political crisis that led to the collapse of the First Republic, civil war and the entry of the military into Nigerian politics.

The military devoted a lot of attention into devising a new type of party system they thought will be more national and less divisive. Both the Gowon and Murtala regimes tried to steer the country towards a zero party or one-party system with the clear intention of establishing more effective state control over the political process. When these attempts were rejected by the political class and civil society, the military used the national unity argument to popularise the idea of the necessity of imposing “Pan-Nigerian” conditions for the

registration of parties. The immediate result of this was that the definition of a political party was changed from what it was in the First Republic. Rather than an organisation formed by a number of people to propagate certain ideas and contest for power, it was redefined as an organisation that is "Pan-Nigerian" and so recognised by the state to contest elections. Section 201 of the 1979 Constitution specifically limits the definition of a political party to an organisation recognised by the state to canvass for votes. The law forbids any organisation, not so recognised to canvass for votes. More importantly, both on the juridical and political levels, parties were no longer considered as popular organisations that aggregate and articulate interests and opinions but as corporate entities that are registered with the state. This meant that the political significance of parties was no longer determined by popular support but by administrative fiat.

Thus, in the run up to the Second Republic, 150 parties were announced and about 50 of them were fully constituted as parties, but only 18 were able to feel that they had any chance of meeting the imposed conditions and submitted their applications. The state recognised only five of them in 1978. They were the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP), Peoples' Redemption Party (PRP) and Great Nigeria Peoples' Party (GNPP). The 1979 Constitution banned independent candidates from contesting elections and outlawed regional, ethnic, religious and extremist parties. The transition process encouraged the emergence of one dominant party which was the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) which was established in 1978 as a coalition of various fractions who had roots in the regional politics of the First Republic. The founding fathers of the NPN systematically waxed a coalition from the segmented and disparate fractions that constituted the Nigerian political class. All the efforts towards building a hegemonic party did not bear fruit. The 1979 elections revealed that the political parties retained strong regional bases and ended up sharing the votes without any of them completely dominating the others. However, ideological politics was strong with the Peoples' Redemption Party (PRP) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) on the left while the other three parties were on the right.

The 1979 Constitutional provisions also created the basis for the elimination of internal party democracy, which impacted greatly on party competition. The fact that parties were parties because they were recognised by the state meant that party leaders were party leaders not because they were popular with their grassroots members, but because they were so recognised by the state. During the Second Republic, politicians ceased trying to persuade their rivals that they should lead; they simply expelled them for anti-party activities by using money, thugs and sometimes the police. The role of party officials became more important than that of party members because they decided on nominations for electoral posts. Factions developed in all the parties, and the state then became the arbiter that decides on which faction was the "genuine" representative of the party. The state, however, acting through the courts, and the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), were less than neutral in their decisions. In the GNPP and PRP factional crisis, for example, the factions that represented the majority of party members and the elected legislators of the parties were declared illegal and the minority factions were recognised. Many popular politicians were thus denied the right to contest in elections. The logic of

democratic politics is that parties try to get popular candidates to improve their electoral chances. The level of electoral fraud in the 1983 elections when the National Party of Nigeria tried to eliminate the other parties from the political arena was so massive that conditions were created for the return of the military three months after the elections. General Muhammadu Buhari, who carried out the coup d'état, did not last long and was replaced by General Ibrahim Babangida.

The aborted third Republic witnessed a flurry in the establishment of new parties that were subsequently banned by the Ibrahim Babangida Government. The Government subsequently established two political parties: The Social Democratic Party (SDP) – “slightly to the left” and the National Republican Convention (NRC) – “slightly to the right”. However, the annulment of the 1993 presidential election that was believed to have been won by and M. K. O. Abiola of the SDP, by General Babangida led to the collapse of the Third Republic .

The Fourth Republic was initiated through the 1999 Constitution. For its first elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) recognised only three political parties – the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP) and the Action for Democracy (AD). Following a Supreme Court judgement on the case Balarabe Musa v INEC, conditions for registration of political parties were liberalized.¹ Subsequently, Nigeria's political space witnessed an unprecedented opening with the emergence of 63 registered political parties by April 2011. Prominent among the new parties are the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Political Change (CPC) and the People's Progressive Alliance (PPA). In addition, many small parties took advantage of the liberalization of the political space to register parties that have proven to be unviable, but meant to be vehicles through which INEC's funding support to parties could be cornered. In order to promote credible elections with the existence of strong political parties, section 78(6) of the 2010 Electoral Act provided INEC with the power to de-register any political parties that failed to win any executive and legislative seats in elections.

Only ten parties won seats in the 2011 elections. On 18th August 2011, INEC de-registered seven parties that did not contest for any election office in the 2011 elections. They are the Democratic Alternative, National Action Council, National Democratic Liberal Party, Masses Movement of Nigeria, Nigeria People's Congress, Nigeria Elements Progressive Party and the National Unity Party (Daily Trust, 19/8/2011, page 3). INEC also announced its intention to de-register more parties as soon as the numerous court cases by some of the parties were determined. At the end of 2012, an additional 31 political parties were de-registered, leaving only 27 registered political parties. (Liebowitz and Ibrahim, 2013)

LACK OF PARTY IDEOLOGIES AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR DOMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

There are many factors that should distinguish political parties from one another but the ideological differences of parties are usually seen as that main issue in their differences. A detailed scrutiny of political parties in Nigeria reveals that these parties are not practically

distinguished in terms of a general belief and guiding Principle of how things should be done or the thrust of the public policies that should be implemented. More worrisome however is the fact that one even finds it obvious that in many of these parties, it is difficult to come to terms with what could be identifiable as the party ideology. Giving an analysis of the situation in Nigeria, as at now there are about five major political parties, the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), the People's Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), the Labour Party (LP), Accord Party (AP); and some other political parties scattered all over the country, with few or no representatives at any level of governance.

Politicians find it easy to move from one party to another because their main intentions are not to serve based on any general guiding principles but to acquire political authority through any available avenue and opportunity that present itself. This was perhaps the case of the formation of APC as a result of the amalgamation of three or more political parties: ACN, CPC, APGA, PDP, ANPP. So to pin-point the dividing lines in terms of ideology becomes a serious issue and problem that politicians, the people and policies makers have continued to grapple with. Now there is a total of nineteen (19) political parties contesting for elections in Nigeria with no clear ideological differences.

MANIPULATING RELIGION FOR PARTY GAINS AND FANNING THE AMBER OF ETHNICITY

According to Burns (1978), religion is the epitome of the oppressed creatures, the heart of the heartless world and soul of the soulless... it is the opium of the people. Political parties and politician in Nigeria appeal to the religious sentiment of the people through campaigns, speeches and outreach. They deliberately attend religious services as elections approach and campaigns were going on so as to manipulate the hearts and minds of the congregation for their party gains and interests, however, they stop to patronize such religion centres and worship places as soon as the election are over. This type of party behaviour has been predominant in the fourth Republic, especially in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. It's a case of mixed faith tickets in order to get people's votes. The implication of this system of party operation and politicians' intentions is that the entire political terrain in Nigeria becomes polarized along religious lines which is inimical to good governance and democratic consolidation.

Additionally, and perhaps, most worrisome in the history of parties' manipulation of religion and their leadership for electoral gain in Nigeria, was the role that many "clerics" played in the 2023 general elections. Several prophecies and predictions were released prior to, during and even after the elections. Party stalwarts were allegedly involved in clandestine discussion with religious leaders to make pronouncements about the outcome of elections, thereby heating up the polity instead of stabilizing it.

Ethnicity, of course has been the subject of an unending intellectual and scholarly interrogation in Nigeria. Several works have been done to unveil the use, leverage and manipulation of ethnic sentiment in the socio-political and historical development of

democracy and governance in Nigeria. Political parties have deliberately been riding on ethnic sentiment or fanning the ember of regionalism for electoral victories. There were situations where people of the same ethnic groups became arch-enemies as a result the invocation of ethnic or regional sentiment by political parties. Amongst the Yoruba of south western Nigeria, there is the saying that “omo wa ni, eje o se”, which literarily means lets allow our own child to do it. In other words, there is this general perception that irrespective of whether the other candidates are more qualified or not, it is the candidate from our own village, town, local government, senatorial district, state, ethnic group, region, etc. that should be supported and voted for during elections.

In the vein of the foregoing, McLean (1991) observed that ethnicity promote group feelings. It has been and still being used to amass wealth and clout at the expense of misguided electorates. Politicians exploit to the underpinning differences instead of unity. Ethnicity is therefore over politicized in Nigeria. The implication of this is that ethnicity has made it difficult for Nigeria to produce leaders that will lift citizens out of quagmire, give them the desired good governance. The consequence has therefore been tribalism, nepotism, bribery and corruption, electoral tool against political opponents and promotion of parochial interests and views, all of which have made democracy and good governance a mirage in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Genuine democratic process is essentially about constitutional government and to institute a constitutional government which aims at accomplishing the people's demands and aspiration, an efficient and robust party system is a sine qua non. In line with the foregoing therefore, the Nigerian State may not achieve the needed congenial milieu for democratic practice and good governance, if there is clear lack of institutional mechanisms for effective party system. The availability of several but practically inefficient and ineffective political parties has only provided, in many instances, platforms for dubious affiliations for personal gains and aggrandizement of the politicians instead of avenues for the fulfilment of the citizens' political desires and aspirations. In all intent and purposes, the number of political parties in Nigeria since the return to democratic rule in May, 1999, has threatened the very survival of the democracy that these parties claimed to have exited to protect and strengthen.

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