

PARTY POLITICS AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The central role played by political parties in the development and nurturing of a virile democracy and its consolidation cannot be overstated. Where democracy survives for a long period of time, it is because political parties, among other vital institutions, are well established, and have played the role expected of them. In Nigeria, the return to democracy since 1999 has ushered in a renewed process of democratization and, thus, heralded another opportunity for the country to launch a new strategy towards democracy, after many years of lost opportunities under a prolonged period of military authoritarian rule. This essay examines the nature and character of party politics in Nigeria and its impacts on democratic governance, essentially from historical perspective. It concludes that to advance the democratic project, the Nigerian public needs to gain confidence in its institutions. The public needs to feel that there are organs of the political system that can guarantee fairness and justice and that are not undermined by wealth through corruption. Common citizens must have recourse to democratic institutions in order to express demands and resolve conflicts.

Keywords: Political Party, Politics, Governance, Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria gained independence in 1960. Since then, electoral democracy has been the basis of legitimacy for the exercise of political power. At the same time, political instability has been a feature of the Nigerian context, driven by regional and ethnic tensions which tested the integrity of the territory during the Biafra war, and by a troubled political settlement, and an increasingly centralised oil economy. This has contributed to frequent regime crises and military interventions. For 32 out of 55 years since independence, Nigeria was under military rule. Nonetheless, the legitimacy discourse of democratic rule has not disappeared from the political horizon. Since 1999, Nigeria has returned to electoral politics, although democratic institutions remain underdeveloped and fragile – and to some extent, have even deteriorated, as exemplified by the high levels of fraud and violence that characterised the five general elections that have taken place since 1999.

In this context, political parties in particular constitute a weak link between the state and the society. The central role played by political parties in the development and nurturing of a virile democracy and its consolidation cannot be overstated. Where democracy survives for a long period of time, it is because political parties, among other vital institutions, are well established, and have played the role expected of them. The ability of political parties to attain this feat is the function of how effectively and excellently they are financed, organized, structured and run on the basis of openness and internal democracy. Other key elements in

the flourishing of virile political parties are transparency, accountability, sound ideology, independence, and high level of organizational and administrative structures. Thus, the institutionalization of political parties and the degree to which they are deeply embedded in a political system constitute the beacon of hope that democracy should sail towards consolidation. Randall and Svasand (1999:2), like many other scholars before them, noted that the relationship between parties and democratic governance to a greater extent determines the viability of representative democracy, and that the survival of modern democracies is unthinkable without the existence of political parties. In Nigeria, the return to democracy since 1999 has ushered in a renewed process of democratization and, thus, heralded another opportunity for the country to launch a new strategy towards democracy, after many years of lost opportunities under a prolonged period of military authoritarian rule. Indeed, the emergence of multiparty democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic can be seen as a major landmark in the process of the so called 'second liberation'. In this process, the existence of political parties in the country is taken to mean the backbone of democracy; its success or failure, and its survival or downfall. The journey thus far since 1999 raises a lot of concern and apprehension, chief among which is the level of financial autonomy, strength and viability of political parties in their search for a legitimate, credible, and acceptable competition for power (Anifowose, 2004:57). The essay examines the nature and character of party politics in Nigeria and its impacts on democratic governance, essentially from historical perspective.

Background to the Development of Party Politics in Nigeria

The development of political parties in Nigeria must be understood against the wider context of how the political system has developed since independence, as well as in relation to the sense of deterioration of the institutions of governance since the return to democracy in 1999. Nigeria is governed by a presidential system. Over the decades, and following the experience of military rule, the country has seen a centralisation of power in the hands of the executive and a progressive weakening of the federal pact upon which Nigeria was founded. However, as political power has been concentrated in the centre and in the hands of the executive branch, an intricate body of informal rules of political interaction has also evolved, including through the experience of civil war (the Biafra war) and military rule, by which power is brokered in a way that achieves a sense of stability – at least among elites. (Domingo and Nwankwo, 2010:3).

At the inception of party politics in 1923, precisely 24 June, 1923, following the introduction of the elective principle by the Clifford constitution, Nigerian parties had very limited and self-serving objectives. The main objective was perhaps, that of buying legitimacy for the colonial government through very limited franchise restricted to Lagos and Calabar. Richard Sklar, in his seminal work, *Nigerian Political Parties* clearly demonstrate how the emergence of political associations such as the People's Union, was only in response to the prevailing realities of colonial administration (Sklar, 1963; Coleman, 1958 cited in Omotola, 2009:620). Little wonder, when the first political party in Nigeria, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) emerged in 1923, under the leadership of Herbert Macaulay, its activities were restricted to contesting elections into the Lagos city council. For years, the UNDP was hegemonic in its dominance in electoral politics in the country. This was to be challenged by the Lagos Youth Movement - later Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) which was formed in 1934 and which defeated the NNDP in the elections for the three seats allocated to Lagos that year. By 1944, the increasing tempo of nationalist agitation had resulted in the formation of another political party – the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (CNCN), under the

leadership of Herbert Macaulay and later NnamdiAzikwe (see, Sklar, 1968: 46-50 cited in Omotola, 2009:620). This was followed, in quick succession, by the transformation of the *EgbeOmoOduduwa*, a Yoruba socio cultural organization, into a political party, the Action Group (AG) in 1950 under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the Northern People Congress (NPC) in 1959 with dominance in the northern region. By 1951, a breakaway faction of the NPC consisting mainly of radical youths based in Kano formed the Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU). These parties dominated the political landscape of the country particularly in their respective regions in the march towards independence and in the First Republic. Historically, Nigeria's political party formations have been characterized by mobilization leaders, who as founder-leaders, exercised tremendous influence. Notable examples of such leaders are Obafemi Awolowo of the AG and UPN, and NnamdiAzikwe of the NCNC and NPP in the first and second republics (1960–1966, and 1979–1983), respectively. In addition, Sir Ahmadu Bello and Tafawa Balewa were the icons of the NPC in the first republic, who though not alive by the second republic, nonetheless commanded a mythical presence and inspiration within the NPN in the second republic. Such leaders influenced party nominations and other internal party processes to the extent of compromising internal party democracy (Agbaje and Adejumobi 2006:39).

After the second interregnum of military rule (1983–1999), the nature and texture of party politics changed. Political parties were no longer guided by an ideology or specific focus; they were not led by a mobilisational leader who could drive and guide their actions and policies, and inspire internal cohesion and discipline. Political parties assumed the character of electoral machines, whose sole aim was to win political power through the ballot. Aspirants were mostly individual actors sponsored by some powerful individuals; because the cost of electioneering had now become astronomical. Over three decades of military rule distorted social values and undermined democratic institutions in Nigeria, political parties and civil society inclusive. It was worse for the development of the country's party system. The political parties were in complete limbo, and almost near extinction, courtesy of the numerous military coups and counter-coups that punctuated Nigeria's political history. The rise and fall of the Nigerian military is well documented in the literature on politics and development in Nigeria. Suffice to say, however, that the military held all democratic institutions captive between 1966 (when they first struck) and 1999 (when they retreated in humiliation), except for their occasional ceremonious “stepping aside.” Weak structures and ineffective operations of political parties made things worse for the electoral environment in the country. Well-functioning political parties are essential for the success of democracy. However, in the particular case of Nigeria, there are limited opportunities for the development of political parties. Political party activities resumed in Nigeria towards the end of 1998 after a long period of military rule during which party activities were banned. The next chapter comprehensively examines the nature and character of the four Republics since Independence.

Electoral Politics, Party System and Democratic Governance

When party politics was introduced in Nigeria in 1922 via the Clifford Constitution, its major impediment was the restriction on political participation and representation. The political parties were limited in terms of number, as fore grounded by the fact that there were only two of them: the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) and the Lagos Youth Movement (LYM that emerged in 1934), and in terms of spread of their activities. Their activities were limited to the coastal towns especially Lagos for the LYM and Lagos and Calabar for the NNDP. This is coupled with the fact that only four people were elected in the election

(Omodia 2010). Nigeria has come a long way since 1922 in terms of the number and spread of political parties. The number of political parties and their spread seems to give the impression that representation has become an important requirement for the existence of political parties. For example, one of the requirements stipulated for the registration of political parties in the political transition to the Nigerian Fourth Republic was that aspiring political associations needed to garner at least ten percent of the votes in twenty four out of the thirty six states to qualify for permanent registration (Aina 2002). This requirement seems to suggest that political parties were expected to really show capacity to represent the people. However, in the preparation for the 1999 elections, this requirement had to be watered down to avoid the emergence of a two party system. This is why the Alliance for Democracy was registered as the third party in 1999 (Aina 2002). Since that time there has been an exponential growth in the number of political parties and this has given the impression that the grounds of representation have increased. The number of political parties has grown from three in 1999 to thirty in 2002, fifty in 2007 and about fifty seven today. However, instead of this meaning more representation, it has not. As the number of parties increased their relevance in terms of being channels of representation has diminished (Egwemi 2009a).

Two major elements, according to Animashaun (2010), have dominated electoral politics in Nigeria in the post-independence period. The first is trenchant disputation of official election results. Indeed, as noted by the late President Yar'adua during the inauguration of the Electoral Reform Committee in August 2007, since the 1959 elections, which were the last to be supervised by the colonial authorities, all but one election has had its result contested. The only exception to this pattern was the June 12 1993 presidential election which was annulled by the Ibrahim Babangida military administration. The post-election crisis that followed the annulment of the election results was not a consequence of inter-party disputation of the upshot of the election. Rather it was orchestrated by a military regime that was evidently reluctant to pursue its demilitarization program to the end. General Babangida was later forced out of power in August 1993 after ruling the country for eight years as military president. The second element, a direct consequence of the first, is electoral violence. Election-related violence has negatively impacted on the quest for deepening democratic rule in Nigeria. In the history of elections in Nigeria, only elections organized by the colonial state and the military were not marred by violence.

As for the military-supervised polls, Kurfi (1983 cited in Animashaun, 2010) has perceptively observed that the absence of electoral violence could not be attributed to the internalization of a culture of tolerance but rather was a consequence of the recognition of the threat of military retribution for breakdown of law and order as well as the possible extension of the transition project. As copiously documented by Anifowose (1982 cited in *ibid*), election-based violence imperiled Nigeria's first democratic experiment with violence in Tivland and Yorubaland as the two significant cases. According to Anifowose, the violence in Tivland was a reaction to political intimidation and harassment of the opposition politicians by the ruling Northern People's Congress (NPC). On the other hand, the violence in Yorubaland was in reaction to perceived massive irregularities that characterized both the 1964 federal elections and 1965 Western region elections. The consequences of these crises largely contributed to the rude termination of Nigeria's first republic through a bloody military coup in January 1966. A thorough examination of the Nigerian democracy since 1999 in particular reveals that virtually all the political parties in Nigeria find it very difficult to adopt an open system that will not only allow members of the party to participate in the decision making process, but also give them unrestricted opportunity to contest in elections under the party's platform. This kind of restriction and constraint has increasingly resulted in party defection, party

wrangling, war of attrition, recrimination, acrimony, coordination dilemmas, and cross-carpeting among Nigerian political parties (Abimbola and Adesote, 2012:46). Political parties are formed to play the crucial roles of political recruitment, interest articulation and aggregation, political education and capacity building of the political leadership. But the majority of the political parties in the countries of the South have been unable to perform these functions credibly, due largely to the complex historical antecedents of the state and inadequate governance mechanisms. In the colonial history of Nigeria for instance, political parties were created as an instrument to facilitate either the transfer of power from colonial regimes to the local political elite; or they were formed by the local political leadership to fight colonialism. Once the colonial state was driven out, political parties degenerated into ethnic and regional groups, acting in most cases as the vanguard of local hegemonic forces to meet their narrow interests. In such circumstances, the people could not have been empowered to have any say in how the political parties were governed. Further, the fledgling political parties were to face greater challenges as they were confronted with the need to choose among ideological positions that would guide their policy implementation. Caught between the two ideological extremes of capitalism and socialism, political parties supported welfarist or conservative perspectives, depending on the preferences of founding members of the parties, but without sticking to any of them.

Key leaders who provided finance to the parties cashed in on their leverage to occupy top political positions both in the parties and in government. The national leaders of the parties were, in most cases, the owners of the parties, whose interests and world views ultimately became the objectives, manifestoes, rules and regulations of the parties. Political parties were no less than the personal property of their leaders, who decided on who should a member. That way, membership of political parties was exclusive, and further reinforced the disempowerment of the people and their lack of ability to participate in party and national politics. The Nigerian political society typified by party politics and other intricacies targeted at seizing governance has been criminalized. The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) has always used its power of incumbency to arm twist other parties and dominate the political system. Worst still, the opposition parties that ought to step up their game in the areas of alternative policy option, strong and dynamic ideologies, checking and probing on the ruling party for accountability has rather threaded the path of seeking a romance of sentimental ideology. Every plummeting condition in the country has been politicized as a failure of leadership by the ruling party without an effort by the opposition parties to prove an alternative policy. The "pull him down syndrome" has played out well for politicians in Nigeria who are avowed to pull the system down when not in power. The responsibility of civic education for quality citizens' participation has been relegated.

Overall, there is a sense that the quality of democratic governance has been deteriorating since the transition to multi-party democracy in 1999, and the irregularities of the 2007 election signal a growing lack of credibility and legitimacy of the institutions of representative government. The 2007 electoral process was rendered highly questionable by levels of pre- election and election-day violence, the problematic registration process, the theft of ballot boxes and ballot papers, and the manner in which results were announced. Most reports since then signal the poor performance of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which is seen to be lacking in independence and impartiality. As such, the immediate consequence is very poor quality human resource shaping the future of the nation, which materializes in ineffective governance and leadership which were identified by Achebe as the bane of Nigeria's many troubles. Since these leaders got into power through crooked and fraudulent means, they tend to employ corrupt means to stay in power. As such

corruption like a cancer has permeated into all levels of governance and every gamut of the Nigerian society. Over a decade of democracy has witnessed years of looting public treasury at the local, state and national levels of government. It is reported that between 1970 and 2007, Nigeria lost an estimated \$400 billion oil revenue to official corruption (Agbo 2009: 55). It is, therefore, less surprising that out of the 36 governors that ruled the states from 1999 to 2007, at least 21 were indicted for looting their state treasuries. Moreover, Nigerian parties have not been able to attain a reasonable degree of institutionalization especially in the areas of internal cohesion and discipline. This deficiency has also contributed to the decline of the conflict management capacity of the parties at both intra and inter-party relations levels. The level of crisis at both levels of party relations is worrisome. It is such that none of the parties have been able to hold itself together without conflict that most times threaten the very heart of the parties. The most notable illustrations can be located in the morality of leadership in all the parties, as well as the unprecedented rate of political vagrancy (Omotola, 2009).

State Regulation of Political Parties

The Constitution of a country and a number of relevant laws and by-laws, such as those regulating political parties and elections, provide the legal framework for the operation of political parties. Relevant constitutional provisions would normally provide a definition of a political party and prescribe a multi-party system and protect the usual list of civil and political rights without which elections cannot be free and democracy cannot be true. Party leaders and activists ought to know and seek to improve these laws and regulations. Although the behaviour of parties in the party system is of far greater consequence to the performance of the party system than the legal framework, we have to acknowledge that such behaviour is influenced, constrained or encouraged as the case may be, by the law and by the structures that the law creates or heavily influences. The electoral system demonstrates its significance both directly, through strategic alliances and strategic voting that the electoral system may encourage, and indirectly, through the number of parties that it helps to spawn. Some analysts view parties as elite-owned instruments for seeking and maintaining political power. But this may not necessarily always be correct. In a democracy, parties are not personalized, and limited to serving only the interests of the elite. Rather, they have structures, rules, procedures, norms and principles. Also, they are institutionalized coalitions, not just for elites but for the mass of members as well.

Their formal machinery or structures are found at all levels of political activity- national, regional, district, constituency, ward, and indeed all the way down to the grassroots. They operate within specified legal frameworks that define their membership, composition, roles and functions, financial base, and operational rules and discipline (FES, 2010:1). Two of the many ways that states regulate political parties are by establishing requirements necessary to create a new political party and dictating party processes. A primary way individuals associate to advance their political goals is by creating a new political party. Although third parties challenge the political mainstream and could be viewed as contrary to the state's interests in political stability, citizens have a federal constitutional right to create and develop them. Depending on the state, a group may be required to demonstrate it is a bona fide political party with a local and state party structure before it is permitted to run a candidate under a political party label. States may also require the party to hold party conventions or meetings and demonstrate the public's support of the party. In general, once political parties are established, states may not regulate their internal structure, governance, or policymaking. However, if a state can posit a relationship between its regulations and "fair and honest" elections, a state may usually (1) enact laws that set voter eligibility requirements, including

eligibility to participate in a primary election, (2) require that candidates be citizens, and (3) specify whether the party must use a primary election or nominating convention to select its general election candidates. States may generally regulate these areas even though the party might prefer to make other choices. When the state-required selection process for a party nominee conflicts with national party guidelines, the latter prevail, at least when the selection of the party's electors to its presidential nominating convention is at stake. For example, states cannot require political parties to select their presidential electors in an open primary, which allows non-party members to vote, when the national party rules limited participation to party members only. In addition, states may not tell a political party which individuals will serve as its delegates to the party's presidential nominating convention. Addressing the distinction between internal party rules and external state regulation of parties, Richard Katz (cited in Janda, 2005:3) noted three objectives of state law concerning political parties:

1. To determine what constitutes a political party. This determination often spawns additional party laws: who qualifies for ballot access, who benefits from public resources (such as subsidies or broadcast media), who participates in the government and how, and so on.
2. To regulate the form of activity in which parties may engage. This umbrella heading covers the raising and spending of funds, campaign activities, issue stands in party platforms or manifestos, and more.
3. To ensure appropriate forms of party organization and behavior. Katz held this to be the most controversial objective, because it intruded into internal issues of party leadership and social relationships. Laws could require parties to elect officers by party members, but a party might prefer to choose them through a party congress. Laws might also demand gender or ethnic equality, or require maintaining party organizations in various national regions. One can imagine other policy goals that nations seek to implement through party law.

Nassmacher (2001:32) discusses three broad strategic options relating to the regulation of party finance: the autonomy option, which emphasizes the freedom and privacy of political parties, minimizing the need for regulation and relying largely on self-regulation and the self-correcting mechanisms of party competition; the transparency option, which highlights the disclosure of information on party finance to enable the individual voter to assume her or his responsibilities and prerogatives and make an informed choice on election day; and the advocacy option, which foresees a set of detailed regulations on party finance, monitored and enforced by an independent agency. A combination of the three is possible and indeed desirable. Nassmacher also puts forward the diversified regulation option which combines "benign neglect, precise regulation, public incentives and occasional sanctions". It is clear that no one model of regulation can fit all circumstances. Every country will need to develop its system according to its political values and culture, its political and electoral system, the stage of development of its democracy, its institutional capacity and so on. There will undoubtedly be a mixture of motives and tools. However, the issue of political finance can scarcely be treated in isolation, since it reflects more broadly on the role and regulation of political parties in general and on the potential for reform and development of the party system as an essential component of sustainable democracy.

In Nigeria, political parties are formed and operated mostly by those Nigerians who possess or have access to the enormous funds required to comply with the guidelines. This in turn leads to the creation of political parties based mostly on alliances of convenience between wealthy 'political entrepreneurs' rather than political parties based on 'ideology' or political platforms. Parties and candidates finance their activities and campaigns from funds provided by party bosses and political entrepreneurs in absolute secrecy. The Nigerian public has no

information as to which entrepreneur has provided funds to any political party or candidate. This type of politics contributes to a lack of accountable governance because political leaders are primarily beholden to the party financiers and their electoral machines rather than the electorate. The cumulative result is distortions in Nigeria's democratic development (Obiorah, 2004:viii). Bearing in mind that the contribution of political parties to democracy "gets increasingly important as the process evolves and is especially central to successful consolidation" (Randall and Svasand, 1999:4), all hope is not lost in making political parties in Nigeria stand the test of time and work on the pedestal of democratic consolidation. But, how do we achieve this significant milestone in Nigeria's democracy where the political parties as pillars of democratic sustenance are either not adequately financed or formed primarily in order to get funds from the government, or dubiously financed and hijacked by political entrepreneurs? Although some of these political parties are strong and could survive even without dependence on financial grants from the government because of the contributions from their members, corporate organizations and other groups, they still manifest some worrisome value orientations. One of such orientations is the dominance of 'political entrepreneurs' or in Nigerian parlance 'money bags'. Furthermore, as some political parties could not stand on their feet without government's financial grant, they become weak and incapacitated in developing new structures outside their local bases. Still others are financially weak to the extent that they become moribund for a long period after the general elections, until another round of elections when they revive their activities (Waliki, 2008:11).

CONCLUSION

Governance in Nigeria has been characterized by inefficient yet authoritarian centralization, a dearth of meaningful political representation, a culture of impunity, and a demoralizing climate of unaccountability dating back to military rule. The combination of aggrieved injustice and the social misery of the majority, in turn, risks producing disillusionment with democracy, creates conditions igniting social conflicts and, most importantly, threatens the stability of Nigeria's political order. Many political elites, past and present, have accumulated personal fortunes through resilient, deeply rooted systems of political patronage that are wired into the booming oil industry in the south. Today, Nigeria is contending not only with a growing gap between its northern and southern halves but also with the polarization between Nigeria's diverse population and an affluent minority that is seen – regardless of its ethnic or religious background – as becoming out of touch, self-serving and corrupt once launched into the wealth and comfort of the federal capital city of Abuja (Hoffmann, 2014:7).

Oil resources are distributed through informal networks of patronage brokered at the centre through the executive. The evolution of the oil economy and related incentive structures have contributed to the development of an intricate web of neo-patrimonial relations between elites (on 'big men' politics, see Sklar et al 2006). This has combined with the legacy of military rule that has led to the erosion of the original constitutional federal arrangement, and to a concentration of political and economic power in the centre. The Presidency is effectively able to "dispense patronage across the country, hijack the ruling party, subordinate the legislature and stifle the judiciary" (Egwu et al 2008). Both horizontal and vertical forms of accountability are fundamentally weak, the prospects for rule of law are weak, and there is a culture of impunity in public office. In this context, political parties are no less susceptible to capture by the personal interests of powerful elites, and consequently fail to fulfil the role of representation, and mediation of state society relations. To advance the democratic project, the Nigerian public needs to gain confidence in its institutions. The public needs to feel that there are organs of the political system that can guarantee fairness and justice and that are not

undermined by wealth through corruption. Common citizens must have recourse to democratic institutions in order to express demands and resolve conflicts. At this point, the public has little to no confidence in turning to any branch of the government to help directly resolve problems without the benefit of wealth (USAID, 2006:15). A central concern for building democracy in Nigeria is thus to alter this relationship between the oligarchy and the citizenry, so as to reconnect the state to its citizens in a more responsible and responsive manner. Another emerging opportunity arises from the relations within the elite, where democratic institutions and practices are increasingly used for competition within the oligarchy. The starting point for democratization must thus include not only the formal democratic institutions that have been slowly progressing since 1999, but also the informal system of oligarchs and their subordinates which overlays the formal institutions of government.

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