

PARTY POLITICS AND FUTURE OF NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY: AN EXAMINATION OF FOURTH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

Democracy provides the opportunities for the people to freely exercise their voting rights in the selection of representatives who govern them. Democracy depends on parties to survive, since the structure of elections right from citizens participation to candidates' selection and presentation of competing political programmes is done by political parties. It is on this note that political parties occupy a special place in the democratic equation. Thus, this paper examines the activities of Nigerian political parties since 1999 to date. The result of examination revealed that Nigerian political parties did not possess features of political parties such as ideology, party manifestoes, likeminded people as well as viable opposition party. All parties are engaged in intra party conflict rather than embarked on programmes that would benefit the masses. The result of undemocratic conduct of political parties such as candidate's imposition, unclear manifestoes as revealed in this paper, gave rise to assassination that portrayed Nigeria as one of the most risky nation in the world. The paper recommends that all political parties should be reformed and reformed in such a way that ideology and discipline.

Keywords: Democracy, Party, Ideology

Introduction

Presently, the call for freedom and democracy echoes across the globe. The world has witnessed phenomenal shift from authoritarian style of governance to democratic rule. The fact still remains that state is no longer interested in interacting with other state where democracy is not practiced. The initial antagonists of democracy are now struggle to replace

the communist of yesteryears with a new democracy. It then follows that any country desirous of relevance within the world system must be seen as democratic compliance (Omotola, 2008:184). African states are not left out in this development. Though, argument in some literature shows that the reasons for supporting democracy in Africa, specifically Nigeria, do not mirror Western perception. Thus, African looks more at democracy in economic terms than political ideology (Saliu, 1999:199). The global recognition of democracy eventually paved way for the re-birth of democratic government in Nigeria on May 29, 1999.

The struggle for democratic government in Nigeria during military era is almost the same as anti-colonial struggle. This is because both the promoter and supporter of democracy in Nigeria are highly committed and dedicated before the transition comes to reality. In the process of achieving it, many of them lost their life, some were even detained while those who escaped the two gone on exile (Saliu, 2004:4). Now that democracy becomes Nigerian “Public good”, credible institutions are required to defend the system. It is in this context that democratic sustainability become imperative. Thus, democracy requires among others the supportive structures, such as political parties. These Political Parties will serve as mediating institutions through which differences in ideas, interests and perceptions of political problems at a given time can be managed (Olagunju cited in Omotola, 2008:184). The fact still remain that “the strength and effectiveness of Political Parties is directly proportional to the degree of resilience democracy enjoy” (Mimiko, 2007:115). It is against this background that this paper is concerned with the relationship between political parties and democracy in Nigeria and the extent of party’s contribution to the survival of democracy in Nigeria.

Conceptual Note

Democracy

Democracy is a concept that does not have any universally accepted definition. In spite of the differences in conceptualization and practices, all version of democracy in the view of Osaghae (1992:40), share one fundamental objective of “how to govern the society in such a way that power actually belongs to all people”. Chafe (1994) argued that democracy is the involvement of the people in the running the political, socio-economic and cultural affairs of their society. The degree of involvement of the people in the total control of their polity, within the standard of natural justices, determines the degree of democratic substance of a political system (Sadeeq, 2008:250). This shows that the peculiar virtue of democracy is thought to lie in the fact that it is only government that can advance the interests of all the members of a politically organized community (Barry, 1992).

Schumpeter (1990) defined democracy as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide, by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote. Competitive struggle, according to this definition, is that individual can take advantage of whatever loopholes they perceived in their opponents' political strategy and thereby rise to power. Held (1982) conceptualized democracy as a cluster of rules and institutions permitting the broader participation of the majority of citizens in the selection of representatives who govern them. In the course of summation of varied definitions of democracy, it is deduced that democracy provides opportunities for the people to freely exercise their franchise in the selection of their representatives and leader. This type of exercise, excluded the use of force and coercion through the state apparatus.

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 (cited in 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) conceives political party as 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, according to Seruton is moral systems that enshrine the sanctity of contact and promise between them (parties) and electorate; it constitute 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 ideology. 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.

The Relationship between Political Parties and Democracy: An Overview

In a democratic setting, political parties are so important to the extent “that neither democracy non democratic society can exist without them” (Omotola, 2009). Democracy depends on parties to survive, since the structure of elections, from citizen participation to candidate selection and presentation of competing political programmes, are done by political parties. The role of political parties become viable when there is an orderly political succession in society. Parties provide order to political process “by regularizing the procedure for leadership succession and for assimilation of new groups into the political system, parties provide the basis for stability and orderly change rather than for instability” (Huntington, 1968). These invariably prompted, Katz (1980) to conclude that:

Modern democracy is party democracy; the political institutions and practices that are the essence of democratic government in the Western view were the creations of political parties and would be unthinkable without them

It is deduced that the foundation of any government in a democratic setting anchors on the growth of effective party system.

Meanwhile, to consolidate democracy, political parties are expected to exhibit the following features as suggested by Kehinde and Adejumobi, (2007) ; they must be composed of likeminded people whose world views are similar, they must promote a set of programmes embodying the version, mission and manifestoes of the party and designed to meet the needs of the public; they must be mass based, which helps to legitimise them; they must evolved gradually and systematically over time, with identifiable leaders who constitute their rallying points; they must exhibit characteristics of internal democracy in their operations. Once political parties exhibited these features for a considerable time the democratic process can be characterized as consolidated.

Political parties play two important roles in a political process: they form a government or they serve as opposition (Matthias, 2007). Dolo (2006) defines opposition parties as “partisan political institutions that are intentionally designed to temper the ruling party’s excesses while still pursuing both legislative and presidential offices.”For democracy to flourish there must be viable opposition parties on ground. Opposition party according to Egbewole and Muhtar (2010) is expected to engage in constant criticisms of the governmental policies which are formulated by the majority, to scrutinize carefully the manner in which these policies are administered, and to keep the possibility of alternative legislative policies and administrative practices constantly in the view of the electorate. As a

result of this, Dolo (2006) argues that “an authentic democracy is one where the ruling party has an effective opposition.” Therefore, in a society where opposition parties were suppressed, democracy itself becomes hopeless.

The Activities of Nigerian Political Parties Since 1999

Right from the formation period, fourth republic parties are the composition of people from diverse opinion. The founders of these parties share nothing in common than intra-party crisis. Omoruyi posited that the manner of origin of the parties does not fit into what we know from literature, their composition can be viewed as mere instruments of transition from military to civil rule (Omotola, 2009). Starting from the origin of the first three political parties, the ruling PDP was described as mixed bag of persons with different ideologies, that is, the conservative, the radicals and the progressives; who do not only misunderstand themselves but are regularly feuding. The AD was a Yoruba based party, formed just to see that power returned to the south west. The compositions of APP (now ANPP) are the set of politicians who supported or served under Abacha regime (Adebayo, 2008). This explains why the current dispensation witnessed more intra-party conflict than the previous ones (Olaniyan, 2009).

The tussle for power and control of the party machinery become the order of the day, as some members parade themselves as founders of the party. Sambine, (2004) posited that those who own or play major roles in the formation of the parties end up being dictatorial. In PDP for example, the former PDP chairman, Ogbe (2004) lamented that:

There were individuals who did not see themselves as being members of the party, who rather sought to own the party or to own part of it and to dictate to the party.

Consequently, the crisis in PDP prompted Sambine (2004) to argue that the party is run as factions and caucuses with many bigwigs posing as members of Board of Trustees and others as elders and leaders of the party. The collision among these group manifested in frequent change of party leadership. Within eleven years, the PDP had six chairmen, out of which none of them complete his tenure. Besides the internal wrangling between former President Obasanjo and his Vice Atiku, the issue of Zoning within the party nearly broke the party into pieces. The rift within APP (now ANPP) led to expulsion of twelve strong members in October 2002. Similarly, the crisis in Alliance for Democracy (AD) at the beginning split the party into two camps and later led to the exit of prominent members of the party. The breakaway group formed a new party, the Action Congress (AC) which metamorphosis into the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN).

Similarly, the activities of godfather in political parties render the parties ineffective in the process of discharging their responsibilities. These godfather impact negatively on democracy by restricting citizen participation as a voter or candidate. Also in an undemocratic way, they imposed candidates' right from local level to national level, on agreement that they surrender the state treasury to them (Omotola, 2007). These kinds of agreement explain why the dividend of democracy becomes mirage in our society. Thus, democracy has no meaning once it failed to improve on the life of citizens. The legitimacy of leaders whose process of selection fallout of democratic norms is highly questionable at the expense of national stability (ICG, 2007b)

The trend of internal crisis within the part since 1999 shows that parties in Nigeria spend more time on reconciliatory process, than on a programme that would benefit the electorates. It is equally deduced that failure of political parties to embraced dialogue in resolving their internal crisis is antithetical to democratic consolidation. Since the principal tenet of democracy is the possibility it offers to resolve crisis through dialogue, without recourse to violence, even when they are irksome (IPU, 2006).

On the issue of ideology, parties in Nigeria possess none. All the six-three political parties, range from the dominant one (PDP) to the peripheral (party with no single elective seat) failed to be identified with one ideology. In the face of ideological emptiness, Sambine (2005) posited that most of these parties were only seeking cheap publicity, and come up with the ambitions to satisfy those not accommodated in the older ones. "Due to unclear cut ideology, politicians behave like political bats changing party affiliation" (Aina, 2002)

Absence of party ideology can also be explained from the angle of executive-legislative relation. Despite the fact that PDP dominate the National Assembly, the executive find it difficult to get enough support to ensure easy passage of its bills. The frosty relations between the executive and the legislative, is as a result of weakness of the political party which fueled the impeachment saga in the fourth republic. Less than a year, for instance, the first senate president and the speaker at the National Assembly was removed. The winds of impeachment also blew to some states executive and legislature. For instance, in Abia state the speakers of state House of Assembly were removed twice between august 1999 and June, 2000. (Omotola, 2008). The implications of the frequent impeachment were captured by Adejumobi and Kehinde (2007) as follows:

First, it absorbed the attention and energies of the main actors within the parties, diverting their focus from urgently needed

internal party organization and planning for elections. Second, it reinforced the non adherence to due process and rule of law..... Third, it created fear, apprehension and tension in the political environment, and decelerating preparations for the elections. Fourth, it created an uneven playing field for actors between and within political parties.....

The activities of all the parties shows that they possessed non identifiable ideology that serve as motivating force, which is expected to be the source of their manifesto (Ajetunmobi and Kehinde, 2007). They failed to have a grand strategy of enlighten the electorates that would make them secured people votes. For instance, in 2007 the most visible message of the Action Congress (AC) campaign is that a vote for AC is a vote against the PDP government. The Democratic People’s Party (DPP) presidential candidate promised free compulsory education for all if elected president; given that Sokoto where he is their current Governor has one of the highest illiteracy levels in the country (NDI, 2007a). Similarly, the PDP promises to make Nigeria one of the 20 greatest economies by the year 2010 (NDI, 2007b). It is deduced that most of the candidates failed to address fundamental questions of Nigeria’s development. The focus of the campaign, according to COG (2007) revolved around personality of the candidates. That made it difficult to distinguish between the sixty-three (63) registered political parties in terms of ideology and policy.

The undemocratic conduct of political parties also contributes in no small measure to the political violence and political assassination in Nigeria. As party abstained from healthy intra-party rivalry in the process of candidates selection, the venue of party primaries were mostly turned into violence gathering. In Benue state, for instance, fighting erupted in Aliade town, on 9 December 2006, after PDP allegedly reversed the result of the state assembly primary, replacing the winner, Tsetim Ayarger with Ashema Chado.

On the issue of opposition, the current number of political parties in view of ICG (2007b), suggesting a more democratic polity, a widening of political space and more options for voters. But most of these parties are composed of individuals whose personal interests are threatened by the existing governments and thus decided to join the opposition party. The existing opposition’s party in Nigeria today lacks the integrity to stick to their stance on some salient political issues as it affects the citizenry. The priorities of all these parties is what they will gains in politics. Opposition parties in Nigerian democracy remained ineffective due to their failure to form coalitions that will give a strong opposition to the ruling party and make

them obey the rule of the game for people to enjoy the dividend of democracy, scholars emphasized the need for alternative policy in Nigeria, for instance, Isakpa (2008) said,

If ruling politicians are failing the people, it is the responsibility of the opposition to step in, in a credible, robust, articulate, clear and coherent manner, to provide alternative policy options on how to deal with the challenges that confront the country and the majority of the Nigerian people.

Once the elections is over, the interest of common man is no longer in the opposition party's agenda. They will be struggling to be part a unity government initiated by ruling party. Members of Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP), after 2007 general elections for example, abandon their party and presidential candidate to be part of the Unity government introduced by ruling party (PDP). The presidential candidate (Muhammed Buhari) of the party (ANPP) was persuaded by his party leaders to drop his case against the ruling party despite the admission of the president that the election is characterized by fraud (Gabriel, 2012).

Conclusion

With respect to the conduct of political parties since 1999, parties are yet not engaged in the issues that will consolidate democracy in Nigeria. Political parties that are expected to performed integrative roles and engaged in nation building instead, are busy with internal crisis. They fuelled the tensions created by division and tribal loyalty, as they embraced exclusion politics such as denial of wider participation by the citizens. They spent more time on internal crisis, than implement the policies that will affect majority of voters positively. As argued by scholar the survival of democracy depends on its ability to address the major problems of the people (Ojo, 2008). The undemocratic nature of the party also fuelled the violence and political assassination that portrayed Nigeria as one of the most risky nation in world. Since its inception in 1999, democratic government has not for once completed investigation in either political violence or political assassination.

The role of opposition is invisible. The party leaders who are expected to play these roles were busy to be part of the "National Government" proposed by the ruling party. The absence of viable opposition denied the ruling party alternative policy. This gives the ruling party opportunities to operate without serious constructive criticism.

The origin, absence of ideology, opposition and lack of charismatic leaders are identified as factors that hinder parties effectiveness to consolidate democracy in Nigeria. And since political parties remained an important institution that democratic survival relied

on, then this paper recommend that all political parties should be reformed. The area of reformation should include the procedure for admitting new cross carpeting members. The transparent in the procedure of selecting party flag bearers as well as involvement of all party cards carrying members in their primary. And a well designed and meaningful party manifestoes should be develops by all parties. By so doing, the parties outside government can criticizes the policy of ruling party base on their programme.

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