

POLITICAL PARTIES, ELECTORAL PROCESS AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Political Parties constitute one of the critical elements of the electoral process and democracy as they serve as platforms where credible citizenship representation can be processed and provide policy choices for the people. Indeed, political parties are central instruments for mass mobilization for the citizenry for an all-inclusive process of democratic governance. Parties under aliberal democratic system are expected to deepen democracy by ensuring credible, transparent, free and fair electoral process which would advance public welfare in line with their manifestos and ideologies. However, experiences of lack of adherence to procedures, godfatherism, disrespect for rules and laws, manipulation and abuse of system, malpractices and several other unethical behavior by political parties in Nigeria over the years cast doubt as regards therelevance of political parties in promoting credible and transparent electoral process and democracy in Nigeria. Using secondary data, the article X-rays the irrelevance of Political Parties in electoral process and democracy in Nigeria. Thus, the central argument of this paper is that, political parties in Nigeria have largely lost their roles of interest articulation and aggregation which promote acredible and transparent electoral process and democracy. Hence, the article made the following recommendations: First, internal party democracy is a must and parties should through strict enforced legal provisions be made to do what is right. Second, the phenomena of electoral rigging and godfatherism should be laid to rest and allow credible, transparent and popular choices thrive. Lastly, Nigerian politicians need to change their attitude and behavior towards party politics and elections and should know that non-democrats cannot run democracy.

Keywords:Democracy, Election, Electoral Process, Political Parties

Introduction

Political Parties in Nigeria have been extensively studied as far back as the colonial period. Indeed, Nigerian political parties constitute one of the central elements of electoral process and democracy in the country. They are normally platforms where credible citizenship representation can be processed in addition to providing policy choices for the people (Edoh, 2018:165). In fact, political parties are critical instruments for mass mobilization of the citizenry for an all-inclusive process of democratic governance. It is in this regard that Schalschreider (1942:1) argued that politically created democracy and modern democracy are unthinkable without political parties. This assertion is further buttressed by the fact that parties seemingly have the singular role mandate over leadership recruitment and the organization of government at different levels including the parliament.

Elections and electoral processes in Nigeria are clearly contentious because they largely repeatedly involve major challenges with different degrees of severity, to the legitimacy of electoral actors, procedures or outcomes. This is not unrelated to the crisis of political parties in the country. Undoubtedly, the deeper the crisis, the more contentious elections become. There are several specific mostly negative impacts of the crisis on the electoral process. These include continuous crisis in the nomination of candidates, excessively contested outcomes, electoral violence as well as delays in the

finalization of ballots by the Independent National Electoral Commission among many others (Ibeanu, 2018:148).

Political parties under aliberal democratic system are expected to help deepen democracy and development by pursuing public policy measures and programmes to advance the public welfare in line with their manifestos and ideologies. However, a political party is much more than an organization for seeking and controlling political power. More critically, it is an organization for expressing and harmonizing interests and that intermediates between the citizens and political society, government and the state. Because of its diverse roles, a political party is a major source and breeding ground of electoral conflicts as well as major platform for expressing, reconciling and managing electoral competition and contestation. Indeed, Alli (2015:1) argued that:

One of the most crucial and yet least developed democratic institutions in Nigeria is the Political Party system. The registered Political Parties in the country are assemblage of People with the same level of determination to use the party platform to get to power. As such it is usually difficult to identify any party programmes or ideologies. The structure of the Political Parties is such that internal democracy is virtually absent. The political parties are weak and unable to effectively carry out political mobilization, political education and discipline.

Literature Review and Conceptual Clarifications

Political party

A political party is simply a body of organized individuals whose ultimate aim and goal is to contest for governmental power through the instrumentality of elections. While it should not be mistaken that the mere existence of political parties presupposes that a society is democratic or otherwise, however competitive and periodic elections have come to at least define the character of liberal democracy (Momoh, 2013:56). Political parties are central institutions of democracy, governance and electoral process. In fact, political parties, as makers of democracy have been so romanticized that scholars claim neither democracy nor democratic societies are thinkable. In other words, the existence of vibrant political parties is a sine quo non for democratic sustenance in any polity (Simebine, 2013:2).

The nature, behavior and performance of political parties and the nature of internal party democracy and relations with other parties have consequences on democracy and electoral process. Unarguably, in all democracies of the world, political parties constitute the engine house of politics and governance as they (are expected to) perform certain vital democratic functions. The role of parties in established democracies is not in dispute. What is in question is their ability to perform their roles in contemporary times; and this questioning is not limited to any particular region but all over the world. For instance, in the United States, Dalton and Wattenbeng (2001) observed that many American Political Scientists have criticized political parties in the country for becoming weak and unable to do what is expected.

In the same vein, Diamond and Guntner (2011) as well as Valelly (2000) among others who studied western democracies have agreed that the period of political party is over as it has little or no relevance in ensuring credible elections and democracy. In Eastern Europe, just emerging from socialist one party dictatorship and embracing democracy, the formation and development of effective multi-party system constitute an up-hill task. Andrei et al (2005) carried out analysis of the dynamics of political preferences within the Russian electorate through a comparative view of electoral support for major

political parties (communist party and others) to the ruling Putin's United Russia Party and found that the relevance of political parties in promoting credible elections is increasingly eroded.

A study by Chunga (2014) on the relevance of political parties in Malawi focusing on adult Malawians' opinions and attitudes as regards their attachment political trust in political parties and the responsiveness of the political parties' manifestos to the problems identified by the by the people, found out that half of Malawians do not trust political parties. It was also found that political parties' contact with the people and connection to the state and policy makers was very low. There is also discord between the people and political parties as popular demands are not adequately aggregated into policy options. Thus, Chunga concluded that this picture suggests that the relevance of political parties in Malawi is under serious threat of decline and on the verge of further decline. Political parties in Nigeria are inevitable for the operation of meaningful democracy and must not be left to lose their relevance. Rodendo (2014:159) argued that:

...the loss of functions and the deterioration of parties' internal organization capacities combined with unstable patterns at the electoral arena, challenge political parties and their roles in democratic regimes. These factors can impact not only the way in which parties function but also democracies' performance. Whatever happens with the political parties might have repercussions in the conditions under which democracy works.

Similarly, abnormal activities of political parties in Nigeria tend to make many people have wrong perception of political parties. To these there are no political parties but political associations in the country with parties having no ideologies or practicing internal democracy. In essence, political parties are central to electoral politics and democracy in Nigeria but experiences of the country over the years have shown that they constitute obstacles to the conduct of free and fair elections and deepening of democracy because of their lack of adherence to procedure, disrespect for rules and procedure, disrespect for rules and laws, manipulation and abuse of the system as well as several other unethical behavior which run counter to the objectives of democratic governance.

Election and Electoral Process

Election, which represents a modern and universally accepted process through which individuals are openly methodically chosen to represent a body or community in a larger entity or government, is one of the cardinal features of democracy. Indeed, election is one of the mechanisms by which a democratic government can be realized and entrenched particularly in the modern era. In fact, it is only through the electoral process that modern representative democracy can be feasible as direct democracy is no longer practicable in modern times. It can therefore be asserted that without elections, democracy cannot be practiced and institutionalized. It is because of the importance of elections in the democratic process that any problem associated with the electoral process has direct impact and consequence on the democratic institutions. One therefore cannot talk of democracy without discussing the electoral process (Nnadozie, 2007:45). Although, elections are held in a wide variety of political systems, they assume specific significance in liberal democracies. This is so because elections guarantee popular participation through which political representatives are chosen from the competing candidates and provide the opportunities for the citizens to play a role in the governance of their society.

The electoral process aggregates various demands in the society into a limited number of choices and assures the representation of diverse opinions in the policy making arena. Consequently, the process accords political leadership legitimacy in which to base their rule and policies (Jinadu, 1995:59). Akinboye

(2005) argued that definitional consensus about election is a matter of intellectual supposition. However, elections generally represent a means through which political expression is measured and the exercise of state power is legitimized and accepted as being derived from the consent of the people. Election essentially is a means by which citizens choose their representatives in conformity with the dictates of modern democracy. Mackenzie (1968:59) alluded to this when he asserts that elections are rituals of choices and that their binding characters are derived from the participation of the individual as a chooser in a social act which confers legitimate authority on the person chosen.

Adejumebi (1998:31) situates the symbolism of elections within the context of popular sovereignty and the expression of social pact between the state and the people. To him, it is the kernel of political accountability and a means of ensuring reciprocity and exchange between the governors and the governed. Obi and Abutu (2009:285) share similar view as they posit that elections offer electorate the freedom of choice, the power to hold elected leaders accountable and provide protection against perpetuation of arbitrary rule.

They further argued that elections are regarded as central and indispensable to all modern democratic governments. This is because in a democracy the authority of the government is derived solely from the consent of the governed. The principal mechanism for obtaining and translating that consent in to governmental authority is the holding of genuinely democratic elections. Indeed, all modern democracies hold elections but not all elections are democratic. A democratic election would characteristically be competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive, credible as well as free and fair. According to Iyayi (2007:10) electoral process entails a lot of cognate activities. In fact:

It encompasses activities before, during and after elections. It includes the legal and constitutional framework of elections, the registration of political parties, party primaries, party campaigns, the activities of print and electronic media in terms of access; it also includes campaign financing, the activities of security agencies and attitude of government in power. It includes the authenticity of and genuineness of the voters' register; it includes the independence or lack of it of the electoral agencies and its organs. It includes the liberalism or otherwise of the political process in the country and the independence of the adjudicating bodies of the election (Iyayi, 2007:1)

In essence, the electoral process involves interplay of series of activities. The existing literature on the practice and science of election has identified the components of the electoral process to include; announcement of transition programs, appointment of the electoral managers, announcement of electoral timetable, registration of voters, voter education, voting, electoral monitoring and observation, security and surveillance of electoral process, announcement of election outcome and adjudication of disputes arising from the conduct of the election.

Conceptualizing Democracy

Reviewing the historical genesis and philosophical foundations of democracy seem to be much easier than making efforts to provide an exact meaning of and definition of democracy. As democracy evolved and spread globally as the dominant political system in modern nation- states, different efforts to theorize and conceptualize it have become too amorphous and imprecise with the result that democracy has become a heavily contested albeit over flogged concept. Not only are there numerous, often contradictory meanings and definitions of the concept, it also seems to mean different things to different people. If there is any consensus on what democracy means, it is perhaps in relation to the understanding that it is not a personal rule that is dictatorial/authoritarian. It can also be said that democracy is based on

some form of participation and/ representation. It is assumed that in a democratic political system, government derives legitimacy from the people. A government under a democratic set up also exercises authority within the framework of a body of supreme laws known as the constitution where citizens have equal political rights to vote and be voted for (Jega, 2007:14). Generally, democracy is a form of government in which citizens in a state have political investments of political participation and trust (Ayoade, 1998:1). It essentially has to do with the ability of the people to control decision-making. This explains why Osaphace (1994) asserts that the central thing about democracy is to ensure that power actually belongs to the people.

Democracy emphasizes freedom of the individuals in various aspects of political life, equality among citizens, justice in the relations between the people and the government and the participation of the people in choosing those in government (Nnoli, 2003:143). According to Schumpeter (1950:250-263, 1976:153-188) 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. The second side of democracy emphasizes the centrality of the competition to the emergence of political leadership. In this sense democracy 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 people's vote. What these conceptions suggest is that democracy as a system of government stresses the sovereignty of the people (Zack-Williams, 2001:213-214).

It is also reminiscent of two dimensions of democracy (Dahl, 2000: 35-40). The first dimension sees democracy as an ideal, goal, aim or standard, one that is perhaps unachievable but nonetheless highly relevant not only for classifying and judging political systems but also for fashioning strategies of democratization, designing appropriate political institutions and so on. An ideal democracy is therefore coterminous with a political system that might be designed for members of an association who were willing to treat one another for political purposes as political equals. Such a system requires certain criteria for effective functioning. These criteria include a set of fundamental human rights of citizens, democratic political institutions to boost citizens' participation in electing representatives, to freedom of expression, inquiry discussion and so on. One important thing is that these rights and opportunities must not just exist as mere abstract moral obligations but should be enforceable and enforced by law and practice.

The second dimension of democracy has to do with practice as opposed to its theory. This becomes more pertinent as Dahl (2008:38) has also pointed out; having rights and opportunities is not strictly equivalent to using them. The mere fact that a democratic society concedes certain rights for example, to vote and be voted for, to their citizens does not imply that all qualified citizens will participate in these activities. For instance, empirical studies have shown that citizens do not put much value on actual participation in political life as exemplified by the experience of the European Community as a whole. There, it was found that the defining character of democracy includes pluralism and multipartism including free and competitive politics, popular participation in the political process, rule of law and respect for human rights and constitutionalism or respect for the rules of the game. Odofin (2005:94) argued that democratic theory is rooted in the ancient Greek polity which classified government according to the number of participants in the decision making process. According to him, government is classified in a continuum ranging from rule by one person (monarchy), through rule by few (oligarchy) and rule by many (democracy). The central focus is locus of power and how power is exercised in a political system. He further argued that democracy is complex and means different thing to different people. Abraham Lincoln conceptualizes it as the government of the people by the people and for the people. This powerful and historic definition suggests that democracy implies consensus government, freely chosen by the people for

the pursuit of the ideals, aspirations, welfare, progress and interests of the people. Such government operates at the mercy of the people and held accountable to the people through periodic elections. It enables people to govern themselves through constant interactions and discussions of common issues, voting in elections and running for public office. A democratic government is propelled or powered by the collective ideas, energy, wisdom, understanding, knowledge and perceptions of the people. In this context, Diamond (2002) argued that democracy is:

A system of government that meets three essential conditions: an extensive competition among individuals and groups (especially political parties) for all elective positions of government at regular interval and excluding the use of force; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies at least through regular and fair election so that no major (adult) social group is excluded and a level of civic and political liberties, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organizations sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation (14-15).

Thus, democracy requires institutional mechanisms, established procedures and organizations such as political parties, legislatures and interest groups through which public opinion is translated in to government policy. The notion of government of the people by the people and for the people is that through periodic elections public officials could be held accountable for their activities and those who are deemed not have performed credibly are defeated at the polls as the threat of defeat at the polls are expected to motivate public officials (Jande, et al, 1989:37). However, democracy does involve only winning elections but also more importantly in establishing organic elections with the people and allowing them to control their leaders by holding them accountable. This may sound abstract in Nigeria where the political gladiators who canvassed and begged for votes from the electorate and abandon them as soon as they assume office by claiming their elevation or appointment is divine and not challengeable. In such circumstances, elections become ritualistic and formalistic which change nothing. The mere ritual of elections cannot guarantee democracy to people who are faced with undemocratic institutions and agencies which continued to erode the significance of elections in Nigerian democratic project.

From the foregoing, democracy is basically a system that offers freedom to choose from among competing candidates, political parties and/ or programs. It is further more about equality of participation/representation. It also means the existence of an effective and functional rule of law as well as conduct of routine and regular elections that must be credible to ensure legitimacy of the government(s) constituted by them. In terms of features, one can say it exudes the following characteristics: it is basically a constitutional government imbued with institutions guided by laws. Structurally speaking, it encourages a multiparty system even if fundamentally there would hardly be any difference programmatically and /or ideologically between and /or among the number of political parties in such dispensation.

Finally, democracy is a form of government that allows for the widest spectrum of participation and involvement which can only be objectively, meaningfully and practically ensured through the electoral process. In other words, the electoral process is at the heart of the democratic system such that without the electoral process, a system cannot claim to be democratic. As the key to popular participation in democracy, the electoral process provides the platform through which the electorate exercises its will to ensure that certain ends are achieved in the political system. Thus, the credibility of the electoral process cannot and should not be compromised to get democracy.

Political Parties, Electoral Process and Democracy in Nigeria: The Missing Links

In all democracies of the world, political parties should constitute the engine room of electoral politics and democratic governance. However, recent experiences tend to cast doubt as regards the relevance of political parties in electoral process and democratic politics especially in Nigeria. The role of political parties in advanced democracies is not in dispute. What is in question is their ability to perform such roles, specifically in developing democracies such as Nigeria. The abnormal activities of political parties in Nigeria tend to make many observers have the perception that there are no political parties but political associations. The absence of political ideology in virtually all Nigerian political parties has added to the factors responsible for their declining relevance. The logic of party competition which makes it necessary for a party to catch more votes makes parties conform to common characteristics. The history, origin, nature, and particularly ideology of each party should give it a distinctive character and flavor.

This makes it difficult for parties in Nigeria to take distinctive position in volatile issues of national or international importance in the electoral market place. Thus, parties deemphasize their original socio-political base in order to appeal to a broader spectrum of the voters. They also deemphasize a particular ideology in order to be able to respond to electoral issues. Parties in Nigeria sacrificed internal democracy in order to be seen to be united. They spread their net to broader social groups to enhance party funding and they step away from leadership campaign to membership campaign (McLean and Mcmillan, 2009:393).

The near absence of ideology among Nigerian political parties has made it difficult to clearly identify parties and made criss-cross-carpeting among politicians very easy. For scholars like Aronowitz (1992) there is no political party without the party adopting a clear political ideology. For him, a political party is formed when members of the party adopt a particular ideology and the absence of such ideology makes a political party identification difficult. He insists that this near absence of party ideology is largely the cause of crisis in internal party democracy. Onyeoziri (cited in Iwara, 2014:54) argued that political ideology serves two main advantages. One, it enables people pay attention to the position of political parties on critical public issues. Two, ideology provides a more stable basis for people and groups to predict the political attitude of voters. Again, for Omotola (2013:9) who on emphasizing the importance of ideology in parties stated that 'the first and most vital identity of a political party should be its ideology stance'.

This is because ideology defines the face between government and opposition parties in the struggle to control state power. Indeed, the role of ideology for political parties cannot be overemphasized as it defines the character and content of the party and provides gate-keeping function between the party and members of other parties as well as the citizens. Ideology also shows party members' grasping of socio-economic realities of the times and serves as a symbol of identity as regards whether they will be located at left, centre or right of the ideological spectrum but regrettably virtually all political parties in Nigeria do not have a clearly defined ideology especially in practical terms.

Similarly, most political parties in Nigeria do not practice credible internal party democracy which meets the minimum international best practices and standards. Gauja (cited in Mimiko, 2007:118) observes that internal party democracy remains potentially an effective means of increasing political participation, awareness and strengthening the legitimacy of parties as a key linkage between government and the electorate. The absence of internal party democracy reduces political participation, public awareness and legitimacy of political parties as strategic link between government and the people and makes parties irrelevant. The absence of internal democracy in Nigerian political parties according to Mimiko (2007:118) is most evident in candidates' selection in Nigeria. In his words:

Absence of internal party democracy is most evident in in the candidates' selection process which has constantly changed in the orientation but not in form, from one in which a party mandarin, the presidential candidate or a party leader simply anoints candidates to one where the conditions for holding internal party elections are so warped as to make vote rigging and corruption their most significant features. In some cases, even when primaries have been fought and won, the party leadership which often equate to single individual or at best a tiny caucus reserves the right to substitute candidates with others who have never participated in such primary elections (Mimiko, 2007:118).

In fact, several political parties in Nigeria are rocked by crisis with several court cases, thereby forcing many notable members to leave a party as a result of undemocratic procedures and processes of fielding candidates for elective positions in Nigerian politics. For instance, the fall of the then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) from grace in 1999 to grass in 2015 began with the internal democratic crisis which saw five of its influential governors cross carpeting to join the then newly formed All Progressives Congress (APC).

Furthermore, the electoral process and elections in Nigeria's representative democracy is largely characterized by rigging and godfatherism which erode the credibility and democratic qualities of its activities. Thus, elected representatives seem to no longer represent the people as such, they pursue their selfish agenda and that of their godfathers and keep themselves away from the people there by making political parties in power at different levels of government fail to be responsible, responsive and accountable to the people which are some of the fundamental principles and attributes of democratic governance.

In Nigeria's democratic politics, godfathers, party stalwarts, assassins, thugs and election riggers enthrone leaders. Instead of being popularly elected through free, fair and credible elections, the party becomes useless as the agent of leadership recruitment, training and candidate presenter because politicians think power must be captured by all means; fair or foul. Jega (cited in Olokor, 2015) observed in relation to the Nigerian experience that politicians have developed the mindsets which make them believe that political power through elections has to be captured and this has to be done by hook or by crook and by any means necessary. But once the people are removed from the process of freely choosing their leaders, the outcome is no longer election or democracy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Political parties, the electoral process and elections should ideally be the pillar on which democracy rests but that is not case in Nigeria. The experience in Nigeria over the years has shown that they rather constitute obstacles to popular democracy because of lack of adherence to procedures, disrespect for rules and laws, manipulation and abuse of the system, malpractices and several other unethical behaviors which run counter to the objectives of democratic governance. It has been argued in this paper that there exists missing links between political parties, electoral process, elections and democracy in Nigeria. To bring this discourse to a close, the following recommendations are made:

First, Nigerian politicians need to change their attitude and behavior towards party politics and elections. They need understand that non-democrats cannot run democracies. Internal party democracy is a must and parties should, through strict enforced legal provisions, be made to do what is right.

Secondly, political parties should adopt ideology for reasons already canvassed in this paper.

Thirdly, the phenomena of election rigging and godfatherism should be laid to rest to allow credible, transparent, and popular choices emerge and thrive.

Fourthly, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) should wake up from their slumber and insist on best democratic practices and standards from political parties and politicians.

Finally, politicians should learn to play the political game according to the rules and stop adopting the tactics of winning by hook or crook.

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