

PARTY POLITICS, ELECTORAL CRISIS AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The struggle by political parties to prevail over each other in order to consolidate their hold on state power has had far reaching devastating consequences on the attempt at democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The shaky democratic environment has been threatened by several challenges since inception in 1999. This paper attempts to explore the interrelationships between the nature and character of party politics and its antecedent consequences and the way these impact on the fifteen years of democracy in Nigeria. Data was gathered through observation technique and available literature relevant to the study.

INTRODUCTION

Political parties and party systems constitute an important and veritable mechanism in the democratization process and democratic governance of any political system is incontestable. As a mechanism by which the ruling class consolidates its hold on state power however, the nature and function of party systems tend to conform to the interests of the ruling class in the survival of its system of domination (Nnoli, 1992).

In the attempt to consolidate its hold on state power, the ruling class and indeed the politicians tend to use political parties and party systems to maintain their grip on political power at all costs. This has had serious devastating consequences which are better imagined. Though political parties vary in terms of their structures and functions, whether in the system of bourgeois democracy or that of people's democracy, however the way and manner the ruling class and politicians use political parties to get or maintain their hold on power appears to be the same.

In Nigerian political system, the way and manner politicians play politics through the manipulation of political parties is seriously lamentable. Politics is considered as a do-or-die affair with the-winner-takes all syndrome. Hence politicians employ all means at their disposal to "win" power most especially through varying degrees of electoral malpractices and political intimidation.

Political parties and electoral system constitute important elements and principles of modern democratic system and upon which democracy strives and consolidates. However, the way political parties manipulate the electoral process and elections to their advantage has had far reaching devastating and threatening consequences on the survival and consolidation of democracy and democratic governance in Nigeria. When political parties employ varying degrees of electoral malpractices, usually beginning with political intimidation of the opposition through party vanguards and hooligans, in the name of party politics one should expect nothing less than electoral crises manifesting in violent confrontations, arson and conflicts. This

unfortunate scenario has become a serious threat to Nigeria's democratization and democracy over the years.

Party politics as applied to manipulation of the electoral process is not a new phenomenon in Nigerian politics, however, what is practically disturbing is that after decades of military rule in the country, and the re-emergence of democratic consciousness and system of government in 1999, electoral crisis seems to have been frequently recurring after every election at the Federal, state or even local government levels. Consequently, the democratic process and system in the country seems at a crossroads.

There is little doubt that election is the most fundamental element of modern democratic representation in any society. As the barometer to measure the political maturity, health, legitimacy, stability and consolidation of democracy in any polity (Alapiki, 2004), the meddlesomeness by political parties in electoral process has produced more pains than gains in the years of civilian administration in Nigeria. And consequently, therefore, as the single more important indicator of the presence or absence of democratic consolidation, election has become the source of tension, apprehension and fear in Nigerians due to the likely crisis that accompany its aftermath.

Excessive manipulation of the electoral process beginning with voter registration before the conduct of elections to the outcome of election results by political parties has generated tension and the cumulative reaction of the masses into violence in Nigeria. This has had serious threatening and devastating effects on democratic consolidation in the country. The local government election conducted in Kano State in April 2014 and which was generally won by the APC was a clear example of the winner-takes-all syndrome in Nigerian politics. This is not a healthy development in Nigeria's quest for durable democracy.

Theoretical Framework

The nature of politics in African context generally revolves around the scarce societal resources. Little doubt then that politicians do all they can to control state power, and the only way is through the electoral process. The theoretical postulations of the Realists School have been found to be more suitable as the framework of this paper (Shedrack, 2009).

Given the Realist theoretical postulation of the inherent flaws in human nature which is seen to be selfish and engaging in the pursuit of personalized interest in power (Shedrack, 2009), what is apparent is that the political class in Nigeria would no doubt go to any length to pursue this personalized interest even if it ends at abusing the electoral machinery and jeopardizing the democratic process. This has been the character of most of Nigerian politicians. According to Morton (1973), Realism believes that competitive processes between actors, primarily defined as states, (and alternatively political parties as in the case of our paper) is the natural expression of conflict by parties engaged in the pursuit of scarce and competitive interests.

Interestingly, Realism as a theory has three major component parts: (a) The Descriptive which perceives the world as an arena of conflict; (b) The Explanatory which seeks to show that there are genetic defects which push human kind into behaving negatively, as strongly upheld by

Koestler (1967) and which believes that wars become inevitable due to the absence of mechanism to stop them from occurring as believed by Walt (1959);, and (c) The Prescriptive, which sees decision makers (individuals, groups or nations) as having the moral justification to defend their basic interest and ensure self-preservation using any means necessary.

The above postulations on the sources of conflict by the Realist school seem to have aptly captured the situation in Nigeria political system. It is a well known fact that political parties have been at serious logger heads with one another in the pursuit of their interests through various means necessary and available. The manipulation of the electoral machinery is one such means. The need for self-preservation using any means necessary has led to the abuse of the electoral process to the extent that Nigerian polity becomes heated up whenever elections are scheduled to take place. People become tense and in constant fear because of the expectation of violence during or after the polls.

In his thesis on “power politics” in “Politics among Nations: The struggle for Power and peace”, Morgenthau (1973) made some astonishing presentations and arguments on Realism as a strong departure from the doctrine of idealism, a theory he accuses of believing in a moral and rational political order based on universally valid abstract principles. Abstract principles that seem practically far from the practical realities obtainable in modern political systems including Nigeria. Idealism has been faulted for believing that human nature is malleable and good.

However and according to Morgenthau, and structural realists like Walt, the imperfection in the World, namely conflict, has its roots in forces that are inherent in human nature, which inevitably manifests in his nature of being selfishness, individualistic and conflictive. They further argue that states will always pursue their national interests defined as power and that such interest will come into conflict with those of others leading to the inevitability of conflict. Interestingly, this remarkable analysis aptly captures the nature and character of Nigerian politicians in the pursue of their interests through their political parties thereby leading to conflicts that often manifest in electoral violence, which has been threatening Nigeria’s attempts at democratic governance. This would be analyzed in subsequent sections of this paper.

Realism further concludes by postulating that actors should prepare to deal with the outcome and consequences of conflict since it is inevitable rather than wish there were none. The theory greatly justified the militarization of international relations and the arms race. The theory also aided in the emergence of other theories like deterrence, balance of terror and the mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) theories. Though Realism has been accused of elevating power and the state to status of an ideology, suffice it to say, however, that Realism has had tremendous impact on understanding conflict at the international level and remains the seeming possible option of explaining the causes of dirty party politics and electoral violence in the Nigerian political system.

PARTY POLITICS: THE CONCEPT, DEFINITION AND APPLICATION IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

The fact that political parties and party systems constitute another mechanism used by a ruling class to confiscate, consolidate and maintain its hold on state power is incontestable. Political

parties therefore constitute an important element of modern democratic government even though their nature and function tend to conform to the interest of the ruling class in the survival of its system of domination.

The fundamental purpose of political parties is to provide stable pattern of expectations, activities and behavior for the peaceful change of government from one faction of the ruling class to other or from one set of individuals within the ruling class to another (Nnoli; 1992) though with the aim of prevailing over other political parties in order to confiscate state power or to stay in it (Ball, 1977:75). Interestingly, it is this goal of attaining political power, in most cases by all means and at all costs, that distinguishes political parties from other groups in the political system. However, this distinction is rather blurred at times especially with regards to pressure groups, certainly the use of various means in the attempt to attain political power has made political parties clearly distinctive from other groups and it is the characteristics that make political parties to venture in the intense struggle and violent politics to attain political power, manifesting in electoral malpractice and violence.

Given the conceptual character and analysis of political parties above, a political party can be defined as a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interests upon some particular principle in which they are all united (Edmund Burke in Ball, 1977:75) with the most important function of uniting, simplifying and stabilizing the political process. Ideally political parties do not divide rather they unite. They bring together sectional interests, overcome geographical distances, and provide coherence to sometimes divisive government structures and provide a bridge to bring together sectional splits in the political system, a function so important to political stability. The extent to which political parties function towards political stability in Nigeria is however debatable. This would be examined in our subsequent analyses.

In another definition, a political party can be seen as a group of people who share a common conception of how and why state power should be organized and used (Nnoli, 1992:140). In fact the name party, taken from the French “Parti”, emphasizes the origin of modern parties in the early parliamentary factions that developed in Britain and France. Before the emergence of political parties, governments were organized on the basis of cliques, factions or blocs.

It is often argued that a political party is an organization concerned with the expression of preference regarding the seizure, consolidation and use of state power and contesting control of the chief policy – making apparatus of governments with party activities that relate directly to the interests of the society at large, most importantly in political education, identification of good and bad leaders, school for government leaders, provision of choice of government and the aggregation and articulation of interests. However, political parties in Nigeria are rather more engaged in the use of various manipulative techniques on the electoral system and process to seize power, thereby endangering the democratic process and political stability of the country.

PARTY POLITICS, ELECTORAL FRAUD AND IRREGULARITIES: IMPLICATIONS TO DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

Party politics has been viewed from different dimensions by scholars of democratic politics and the critics of representative democracy alike. Generally most definitions tend to revolve around activities of political parties particularly the formation of political parties, the organizational structures of the political parties and elective principles (Awopeju, et al, 2012).

Whereas some critics and antagonists of representative democracy argued that party politics refers to forcing of party representatives to follow party line on issues rather than the will of their conscience or constituents, Olaniyan cited in Ademola (2009) argues that party politics are activities of political parties in a democratic environment to seek for the control of political offices through stated norms of elections. That party politics exists when elective principles are present in a state and by implication under a democratic regime which recognizes the legitimate choice of the citizens to select or elect those to represent them in government offices.

However and from a more realist perspective, Omilusi (2010) seems to have captured the meaning of party politics as activities of formal structure, institutions or organization which compete through electoral process to control the personnel and policies of government and with the aim of allocating the scarce resources of the state through an institutionalized means or procedure. Arguing further, Omilusi posits that the primary objective of party politics is directed towards a single goal of wrestling for governmental or political power.

By implication party politics involves the struggle for political power leading to competitions and conflicts by political parties and more often than not using and manipulating the electoral process. Furthermore and going by this analysis party politics in the context of Nigeria has deliberately created electoral crisis that has endured for so long and which has been beneficial to a fraction of the political class that is bent on maintaining the status quo. Lamentably the products of this party politics in Nigeria have been government of undemocratic elections that are distinctly exclusive, dictatorial, corrupt, predatory and unresponsive to the needs and yearnings of the populace. And since it is a non-participatory political set up, the ultimate outcome is the output of governance that falls short of the expectations and needs of majority of the citizenry. That is on the one hand.

Party politics, on the other hand has produced undemocratic elections that were pervasive and a negation of all known democratic tenets as these elections were characterized by electoral fraud encompassing all forms of electoral malpractices, irregularities and rigging which have underlying criminal intents and purposes and which connote criminal and illegal electoral acts, which usually sway electoral victory to the desired and unpopular direction.

When political parties compete for political power using the electoral system, they engage in various forms of election malpractices and fraud, which could take the form of stuffing of ballot boxes with ballot papers well ahead of actual voting. However, this is successful only if the registration of potential voters corresponds with the number or amount of ballot papers per ballot box. So election fraud begins with the registration exercise and party members normally go round registration centres to ensure that as many potential voters as possible are registered by

bribing the registration officers. Another electoral fraud is the seizure of or hoarding of electoral materials especially ballot papers, usually meant for areas the political parties have less of potential voters. Manipulation and fabrication of results is another way political parties use to rig elections and this is done by heavily bribing electoral officers at the polling stations, collation centres and election offices where results are announced. Political parties especially ruling parties, further make use of law enforcement agencies to intimidate, maim and disenfranchise eligible voters, or even murder political opponents.

Conversely, party politics in the Nigerian political system has undoubtedly brought more pains than gains to the country's attempt at democratic installation. It has led to series of electoral crisis and violence especially since the 1999 elections that brought Olusegun Obasanjo to power. However, even this was not as serious when compared to the violence that erupted at the aftermath of the 2003 general elections which claimed the lives of over one hundred innocent lives while leaving several injured. The aftermath of the 2007 elections which brought Umaru Musa Yar'adua to power left about three hundred people dead, while the 2011 election which brought Goodluck Jonathan to power following the death of President Yar'adua led to the death of several thousands of people across the Northern parts of Nigeria. The violence which began as protests and riots against the election results significantly turned to sectarian and tribal conflicts claiming several lives of people that were practically innocent. According to Corinne Dufka of the Human Rights Watch, the deadly election-related and communal violence in Northern Nigeria following the April 2011 Presidential voting left more than 200 people dead (Dufka, 2013). Even then the eight hundred people dead figure was just an approximation. The number of innocent people dead was much more than that.

Conclusively, therefore, the use of political acts and principles directed toward the interest of one political party or its members without reference to the common good in the name of party politics has had far-reaching devastating consequences to the political environment in Nigeria over the years. Unequivocally, therefore, Nigeria's politics has been, and remains dominated by crooks whose stock in trade is corruption using acrimonious party politics and ineffective governance. For them a state be better destroyed if they are out of political power. No wonder the Boko Haram tragedy which appears to be more of political than sectarian precedence of destruction of innocent lives, displacement of village settlements across the North-Eastern part of Nigeria continues and practically attest to this fact. The Boko Haram tragedy has become more of a conduit pipe for siphoning millions of public funds involving security personnel, top government officials and highly placed politicians in the National and State Assemblies in the name of Security votes and fundings to fight Boko Haram terrorists that do not exist. That is why the problem of insecurity continues unabated in Northern Nigeria despite the millions set aside monthly for security, because the Boko Haram is rather political. These characters seem to lack the moral purpose to affect the most needed change at the grassroot, and many do not even understand the purpose of leadership and politics. Consequently daily life has been harsh and brutish because these politicians are rather working for their personal interest.

Electoral crisis and violence is not the only negative implication of the acrimonious party politics being employed by the Nigerian political parties. Conversely, party politics has, over the years, led to government failure given the fact that unpopular, corrupt and vicious leaders are made to assume power through electoral fraud. As this has become an enduring cyclical phenomenon,

Nigerian political system is said to be engulfed in a crisis of governance characterized by crisis of rising expectations as governance falls short of meeting popular expectations with people's hopes of a better future increasingly being dashed. Furthermore, exclusive and restrictive democratic space emerges leading to lack of accountability and transparency. These have been enormous threats to the socio-economic and political stability of the country. Increased mass poverty has continued to constrain democratic consolidation efforts in Nigeria and which Ake (1994) refers to as the democratization of disempowerment.

CONCLUSION

The use of acrimonious party politics by political parties in the attempt to control state power or remain in it by manipulating the electoral machinery has had far reaching devastating consequences on Nigerian political system and democratic consolidation over the years. Fierce competition to control governmental power had led to the disregard for the rule of law governing the conduct of elections, and which has manifested in absence of internal democracy within the structures of the political parties. Consequently candidates were selected not on popular mandate and this has impacted on imposition of unpopular leaders in the country.

The fact that politics is regarded as a form of investment by political parties, hence the use of all avenues in order to win or rig elections, and this has great consequences manifesting in electoral crisis and violence in the country. The leadership on their part seem unconcerned about addressing popular demands and improving the living conditions of the citizenry. Hence the continuing problems of poverty, marginalization, violence and terrorism in the country manifesting in persistent violence and bomb blasts, kidnappings of innocent school girls, killings and destructions of whole villages in Northern Nigeria in the name of Boko Haram.

However, the activities of the Nigerian political parties must not reflect acrimonious party politics. Rather their formation, choice of party leadership, choice of candidates, organizational structure, funding and elective principles must reflect democratic principles and the rule of law. This would ensure peaceful elections devoid of violence and the necessary smooth political transition needed for sustainable democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PARTY POLITICS, CREDIBLE ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STABILITY IN NIGERIA: THE WAY FORWARD

Apparently and from the foregoing the current crisis in governance and democratic consolidation has been largely dependent on acrimonious party politics in Nigeria. The lawless and undemocratic nature of elections in the country has continued to cause series of electoral and sectarian crisis within the polity. There is no doubt that cut throat competition in the attempt to wrestle governmental power through undemocratic electoral process by political parties has exacerbated the crisis of electoral politics in the country over the years. It has also spawned understandable cynicism among the electorates, opposition parties and even the civil society on the capacity of election as a means of credible leadership, recruitment and policy preferences. These have been serious threats to democratic consolidation since the 2003, 2007 and 2011

presidential elections in Nigeria. This paper therefore proceeds to proffer the following recommendations:

- a) Acrimonious party politics and the outcome of elections has reinforced the fact that since Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999, electoral process has lost its essence as a tool for expressing popular will, institutionalization of responsive government and legitimization of political regimes. No wonder, the subsequent in low voters' turn out in fresh and re-run elections across the country. There is, therefore the urgent need to reform the electoral machinery and process in a manner that will restore public confidence in the process by political parties and their manner in competing for political power and governance in the country.
- b) One sure way of ensuring democratic stability and electoral confidence in Nigeria is through healthy party politics. This is necessary because political parties need to conduct their activities in a democratic manner and within the democratic environment. This is more important especially in ensuring internal democracy within these parties in the first place. In a situation whereby internal democracy is missing in the selection of candidates for elections and the formation of party leadership one should expect nothing less than acrimonious and fierce party politics.
- c) Smooth political transitions after elections require that party candidates who lose elections relinquish power gracefully and peacefully so that they can emerge with their dignity intact thereby, through their examples, contribute to strengthening of the democratic system. Equally, the winning candidates must reach out to and show respect to their political opponents. This will help to bridge differences and drastically minimize the potential for conflict which can undermine democracy and development (Bjornlund, 2014). Political parties and politicians must have to respect democratic political institutions and independent civil society organizations, as these help ensure respect for electoral outcomes. These institutions and values in turn bolster people's faith in their governments and their willingness to support peaceful political transition.
- d) Democratic consolidation requires respect for the rule of law which survives regardless of the outcome of elections. Hence what is imperative is for political parties to adhere to the rules and regulations governing the conduct of elections. This will reduce the chances of the unruly behavior of the politicians before and during election exercise. Political parties must equally respect and recognize legitimacy, fairness, effectiveness and those checks and balances mechanisms involved in the conduct of elections. This would greatly reduce the eruption of crisis and electoral violence. There must be fairness in the election of candidates by apply the stated rules and regulations governing the selection of candidates, because this is the only way to restore and command public respect and loyalty and citizens accept even disappointing election results. When laws are implemented fairly and disputes adjudicated impartially, democratic consolidation becomes a reality. The best way to show what rule of law means to us in everyday life is to recall what happens when there is no rule of law. The 2007 and 2011 electoral crises are clear indicators of this analogy.

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