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Political Parties and Opposition Politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Abstract

One of the major roles a political party performs in a democratic system is to serve as a formidable opposition to the government in power. While political opposition is central to the operation of democratic systems and societies much has not been done about the role of opposition parties in transitional democracies like Nigeria, especially in recent time. It is on this basis, that this paper examines political parties and opposition politics in Nigeria with specific focus on the Fourth Republic. This paper has a two-fold objectives. One, it examines the viability of political opposition in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Secondly, it examines the challenges undermining virile opposition politics in Nigeria. Through qualitative analysis of data derived largely from secondary sources, it was discovered that political opposition in Nigeria is generally weak. The paper averred that low level of party institutionalisation in Nigeria among others is one of the factors responsible for the lack of capacity of political parties to serve as viable opposition platform to government in power. The paper recommends among others, that leaders of political parties need to engage in practices that will enhance party cohesion, discipline, and conflict management capacity.

Keywords

Political parties, opposition parties, political opposition, political ideology

Introduction

Political parties undoubtedly remain one of the most significant methods and vehicles for political organisation. Indeed, parties play a pivotal role in enhancing efficient functioning of any democratic system. According to Stokes (1999) the central claim of democratic theory is that democracy induces governments to be responsive to the preferences of the people. He further

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observes that political parties organise politics in every modern democracy, and that parties are what induce democracies to be responsive (Stokes, 1999: 243). As a matter of fact, political parties are key pillars of good governance, the rule of law and the protection of human rights in mature democracies. In essence, the existence of vibrant political parties is crucial to the institutionalisation and consolidation of democracy. Political parties in any democratic polity, most especially the ones in transition perform functions which contribute to the sustenance of the democratisation process.

According to Bartolini and Mair (2000), the functions of political parties can be summarised under five main headings that include: the integration and mobilization of citizens, the articulation and aggregation of interests, the formulation of public policy, the recruitment of political leaders, and the organization of parliament and government. Beyond these functions of political parties however is the political opposition role performed by parties in a democratic setting. Even though political opposition may not be perceived as one of the traditional roles of political parties, it remains one of the most inevitable aspects of any democratic society. Functional and effective political opposition is an important attribute of a vibrant, dynamic and inclusive democratic system. The opposition party in a democratic system has the task of representing the interest which may have been overlooked by the ruling party, provide unavailable information to the government about public reaction to a particular government policy and provide criticism and useful alternatives to government policies (Apter, 1970).

While political opposition is central to balance of power and the dynamism attributable to the operation of democratic systems and societies, much has not been done about the role of opposition parties in transitional democracies like Nigeria, especially in recent time. It is on this basis that this paper examines the central role of political parties as vehicle for the actualization of opposition politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The paper is divided into six sections. Following this introduction is the exploration of conceptual perspectives on political parties and opposition politics. The third section discusses the nature of political parties and party politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Section four, examines political parties and opposition politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Section five, highlights the challenges of opposition politics in Nigeria. The last section concludes by looking at how the creation of viable political opposition in Nigeria can be achieved and how this will advance the consolidation of Nigeria's democratic process and institutions.

Political parties and opposition politics: A conceptual discourse

Political parties

Political parties are organisations whose members have values, ideals and aspirations in common and at least participate in the organised contest or struggles for political power (Kura, 2011). Political parties have also been defined as 'associations formally organised with the explicit and declared purpose of acquiring and to some extent maintaining legal control, either singly or in coalition or electoral competition with other associations over the personnel and the policy of the government of a sovereign state' (Coleman and Roseberg, 1966: 14). In his own view, Agbaje (1999: 195) noted that "a political party as a group of persons bonded in policy and opinion in support of a general political cause which essentially is the pursuit, capture and retention for as long as democratically feasible, of government and its offices".

According to Wilson (1992: 138), "a political party is a group that seeks to elect candidates to public office by supplying them with a label which is a party identification and through which they are known to the electorate". Thus, following this position, a political party should have three clear variables and these include: a label in the minds of its members and the electorates, an organisation that campaigns for candidates seeking elective offices and leaders who control the legislative and executive arms of the government (Wilson, 1992: 138). Johari (2008: 424) conceives political party as an agency to mobilise people's support at the time of elections. To Johari (2008) parties are instrument for aggregation of interest that demands vociferous articulation.

One common denominator of the definitions examined above is the desire to acquire state power. Essentially, therefore, it can be deduced that political parties possess two essential characteristics which are: a collection of individuals with the same interest and objective, and an organisation which struggles for power. Generically, political parties must possess some certain characteristics which will distinguish them from other social and political organizations. One of the significant distinguishing factors is that of ideology. Parsons (1951: 24) noted that "ideology is the shared framework of mental models that groups of individuals possess that provide both an interpretation of the environment and a prescription as to how that environment should be structured".

For political parties to function properly in a democratic society it must have well defined ideological conceptions. Ideology in this respect can be referred to as what Howarth (2001) cited in Omotola (2009) describes as democratic ideology. Political parties which lose in electoral contests form the opposition and keep a constant check on the government. They form opposition when they are in minority in the legislature and constantly put pressure on the government for proper governance. They do these by educating the people, help in formulating and shaping public opinion, articulate peoples'

demands and convey them to the government, and they provide a linkage between people and governmental institutions (Kura, 2011).

Opposition Politics

According to Brack and Weinblum (2011), the concept of political opposition has rarely been rigorously defined. The scholars believe that a study of classic literature on opposition politics provides a quite nebulous and extensive definition. As a concept political opposition has been defined in a relative term referring to a relationship: "standing in some form of disagreement to another body" (Norton, 2008: 236). Opposition politics can also be viewed as all the political parties which do not form part of the ruling government or the coalition in government (European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments, 2014).

Ionescu and De Madariaga (1968: 9) conceive of political opposition as the "most advanced and institutionalized form of political conflict". A common variable to the definitions is that scholars tend to define political opposition with emphasis laid on a particular form of opposition, which is the parliamentary opposition. However, some scholars provide an implicitly different variety of opposition politics. For instance, Shapiro (1967) describe opposition politics as an organized political group, or groups, which aims at removing the government in power and replace it by one of its own in an electoral contest. To this effect, Kirchheimer (1964) delineates three different modes of opposition: "classic or loyal" opposition, offering alternatives to the chosen policies while recognizing the government's right to govern and the constitutional system in place; "principled" opposition, opposing both the policies of the government and the constitutional requirements of the political system; and "eliminative" opposition where the minority group competes with the incumbent for power but ceases to present alternative projects.

Irrespective of its forms or varieties, opposition politics adds dynamism to democratic system and opposition parties perform some important roles in a democratic system. Kizza (2005: 8) summarises the functions of opposition parties as follows:

Interest aggregation: Political parties are important organs for aggregating the interests of the political community. Interest aggregation often culminates in the articulation/ projection of certain preferences, values and ideologies into policy and law-making process and in the budgeting process.

Promoting responsible and reasoned debate: This promotes "national conversation" and pushes democratic discussion to a higher level of political development and maturity.

Maintaining touch with the voters and citizens and demonstrating the relevance of politics to ordinary people. That is, the oppressed, the marginalized and the disenfranchised. Opposition parties hold the government to account for its commissions or omissions.

Opposition parties present a viable alternative to the incumbent government by designing alternative ideas, principles and policies for governing society. Should the party in power let the voters down, the "government-in-waiting" takes over the reign of government through free and fair elections.

Finally, opposition parties are the unpaid but dedicated principal researchers for the government in power. In the rush to the "middle ground" that has characterized political party dynamics after the Cold War, incumbent regimes have typically plagiarised the manifestos of opposition parties and adopted their researched ideas, policies and programs without acknowledgement.

Political Parties and Opposition Politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

Prior to 2015, the People's Democratic Party remained the dominant party in Nigeria since the commencement of the Fourth Republic. Other political parties notably, the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) formerly the All People's Party (APP), Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), Labour Party (LP), Progressive People Alliance (PPA) among others exist in various shades and forms as opposition parties having regional or sub-national representation as the case may be (Ibrahim and Hassan, 2014). It is instructive to note that during former President Obasanjo's first term in office (1999-2003), no formidable opposition party can be said to have existed. After the 1999 general elections, parties which did not make any impact in the elections instead of remaining as a viable opposition went back to the drawing board to start preparing for the next general elections due in 2007. This period has been described as a period of sycophantic praises rather than true opposition (Epelle and Enyekit, 2015).

As identified by Naanen (2015: 1) the three parties that emerged in 1999, did not demonstrate any marked ideological differences. None of them could be described as leftist. The Alliance for Democracy (AD) which won all the states in the South-West continued in the tradition of the politics of that region which had a strong welfarist tendency. There was little ideological dichotomy between the People's Democratic Party and the All Peoples Party (APP), later All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), as both could be described as right of the centre. The face-off and succession crisis between the then incumbent president Olusegun Obasanjo and the then vice president Atiku Abubakar between 2003 and 2007 was a form of intra-party squabble and internal party's tussle for power and influence. A vivid manifestation of this internal squabble within the PDP was the indictment of then vice-president Atiku Abubakar by

an administrative panel instituted by the Federal Government under the direction and guidance of then president Obasanjo. Rather than resign his position as vice-president in the same administration that arraigned him before an administrative panel, then Vice-president Atiku Abubakar, challenged the verdict of the panel in court and won (Sahara Reporters, 2006).

In 2007, Umar Ya'Adua emerged as the PDP presidential aspirant and eventually won the presidential election. Umar Ya'Adua on health grounds was unable to continue the performance of his duties as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. According to Omotola (2011) before assuming office as Nigeria's president in May 2007, there were already growing concerns about Yar'Adua's health. As Governor of Katsina state between 1999 and 2007, Yar'Adua was said to have regularly been on medical trips abroad. When the health crisis of the President Yar'Adua got to a point he was flown to Germany and later to Saudi Arabia for medical attention. The ill health and absence constitutionally meant that the President was incapacitated and unable to perform his duties, therefore requiring, according to the Constitution that the Vice President be sworn-in into office in acting capacity.

However, the failure of Yar'Adua to transmit a letter to the National Assembly empowering his deputy, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan to act as president of the Republic in his absence generated serious constitutional crisis. It meant that Jonathan could not step in as Acting President. A presidential vacuum was, therefore, in the offing. Dealing with the problem became extremely difficult, because as it later crystallised, the presidency had been appropriated by powerful individuals "cabal" that are part of the government (Omotola, 2011). This scenario generated a tense intra-party opposition which by and large was informed by personal interest of certain powerful individuals in the Yar'Adua presidency. The situation divided the ruling party into two. On one side was the "cabal" which was bent on protecting Yar'Adua's presidency till the end, come what may and at all cost, even if it meant subverting the constitution. The second group composed of those who felt the doctrine of necessity should be applied so as not to leave a vacuum in governance (Omotola, 2011). Omotola (2011) further claimed the aim of the opposition forces in the constitutional crisis that ensued was to rescue Nigeria from the strong grip of the cabal that was pre-eminent in the Yar'Adua's administration.

Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, the then vice-president first served in acting capacity following the incapacitation of the then President Umar Ya' Adua, and later sworn-in as president following the death of President Yar'Adua. Jonathan however, won the ticket to contest as the presidential flag bearer of the PDP in the 2011 presidential election. Goodluck Jonathan eventually emerged as the winner and was sworn in as the president and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on May 29th, 2011. Political opposition under Jonathan's administration took an unprecedented dimension. This was as a result of the successful merger of the

three leading opposition parties; the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), The All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP) and the Congress for Progressive Change and subsequent registration of the new party by Nigeria's electoral management agency, the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC on July 31st, 2013. After the merger, a new name the All Progressives Congress, APC and symbol 'the broom' was adopted as identifiers for the new opposition party. The merger was described as the most committed effort to date by the opposition to form a united front in Nigeria (Saka and Amusan, 2018; Adeseri, 2014). Following the merger was a spate of defection of top PDP members to the newly registered political party APC. Top members of the rank and file of the PDP defection to the APC gave a lifeline to the party that, though in theory, political power at the national level is within reach.

Prior to the conduct of the 2015 general elections, it appears that majority of the citizens were somewhat dissatisfied with the Jonathan's PDP led federal government. The opposition party however, animated popular dissatisfaction by engaging in a well-coordinated and issue-informed criticism of President Jonathan's administration on many grounds with particular emphasis on pervasive corruption that characterized governance under the regime. Indeed several cases of corruption involving government officials and PDP stalwarts were reported in media outlets in the period leading to the 2015 general elections. Notable among these were the corruption scandal involving Honourable Farouq Lawan who was the Chairman of the ad-hoc committee set up by the House of Representatives to probe how the fuel subsidy fund that was appropriated by the National Assembly in the past had been disbursed (Ezigbo, 2012). Also in the category was the former minister of Aviation, Mrs. Stella Oduah that was reported to have arm-twisted a cash-strapped agency in the Aviation Ministry to purchase two armoured BMW 760 series (bullet proof) cars at highly inflated prices. The administration was also criticized for its response to and handling of the kidnapping of 270 schoolgirls from Chibok community, Borno State by the dreaded Boko Haram group. These were few of the issues the opposition party APC appropriated to discredit the ruling PDP as it canvassed for votes in the run up to the 2015 general elections.

Having failed to address some important public issues, most especially, the issue of insecurity, the Jonathan administration was not regarded as a populist administration. According to Naanen (2015: 9) while the PDP held on to power, the APC by its emphasis on fighting corruption, combating insurgency and introducing far-reaching economic reforms, had associated itself with people welfare. Prior to the general elections the APC appeared to have gathered momentum such that some people already perceived the party as a potential winner of the coming elections (Lunn and Harari, 2015). The election which was supposed to be held on the 14th of February, 2015 was postponed till 28th of March 2015. In the March 28th presidential election, the APC presidential aspirant emerged as the winner, winning with comfortable margin

in most states in the three geo-political zones in the North and managing to garner majority votes in the six states in south-western Nigeria.

The victory for Buhari and the APC according to Lunn and Harari (2015) marks the first electoral turnover from one party to another in Nigeria's history, and it is a watershed moment in the continent's political life. President-elect Muhammadu Buhari and Vice President-elect Yemi Osinbajo won 54 percent of the national vote. The election recorded relatively low turnout of 43 percent compared with the 54 percent turnout recorded in 2011 presidential election. Despite this the election was conducted remarkably peacefully. The low turnout is also a positive sign in that it suggests relatively little post-polling vote inflation, by far the most common means of election tampering in previous contests. And Jonathan's quick and magnanimous concession was another first of its kind in Nigeria, a sign that perhaps the country's political elite has finally begun to accept losing as a core component of the democratic experience (Lunn and Harari, 2015).

The election brought to an end the sixteen-year reign of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) at the centre precisely on May 29, 2015. The implication been that for the next four years, the APC will be in government, and the party will be playing a role completely different from the one which it played as the opposition in the two years since its formation and for the many years before, as component party units (Adebowale, 2015). It is further observed and conventionally too, that, since our electoral laws presently require the vehicle of a political party for anyone who wants to occupy the driving seat of the nation, it may be assumed that the contending party(-ies) that missed out on electoral victory automatically constitute the opposition. The PDP in the subsequent years after 2015 will occupy an unfamiliar position of opposition party. The manner and effectiveness with which the PDP performs this unfamiliar but central role of opposition will to some extent impact the democratic process in Nigeria.

Challenges of Opposition Politics in Nigeria

Discussing the challenges of political opposition, Apter (1970) noted that new nations or democracies after independence are faced with the accumulation of immediate and often mundane tasks such as the provision of social amenities and other essential services and necessities beyond the subsistence level. To state this aptly, Apter (1970) reiterated that in most of these countries such as Nigeria, per capita calorie intake remains far below that considered necessary for normal labour. Vivid in the minds of many political leaders are memories of the days when, not so long ago, they slept on the veranda and suffered from want of food and shelter. Some political leaders grew from poverty and obscurity to power in a short time. Politics is their only profession. For them to go out of office is in effect, for them to become unemployed. Therefore, most

incumbent governments in post-colonial African states frown at multiparty system and in most cases strive with all the might associated with state authority to weaken, harass, divide opposition parties and in the extreme cases exterminate opposition leaders all in a bid to weaken political opposition.

Another impediment to the development of viable political opposition in Nigeria like other post-colonial states in Africa is the dearth of political ideology among political parties. Political ideology is an important element of any political party. Ideology characterized as "a systematized and interconnected set of ideas about the socio-economic and political organization of society as a whole" by (Nnoli, 2003: 178) seems to be a missing ingredient of parties and the political system in Nigeria. Political ideology plays numerous and important roles in any democratic setting. According to Nnoli (2003), political ideology helps in the enhancement of the political appeals of a political party, by differentiating one party from another. It is however, saddening that Nigerian political parties' lack clear-cut political ideology which may be used to differentiate one party from the other. Momodu cited in Adeyeye (2012: 29) was of the opinion that "the tragedy of the opposition in Nigeria before the alternation of ruling party was that there is no difference in party ideology and structure between the PDP and then opposition parties. By all intents and purposes the parties are the same and therefore considered as really not having much to offer." Buttrressing this position, Simbine (2005: 24) argues that:

an overview of the manifestoes of political parties in Nigeria shows that their objectives and strategies are not radically different from one another in their planks and are all virtually addressed to the same issue... the APP and AD manifestoes are almost a carbon copy of each other with the only difference discernible in them being the emphasis that they give to the programmes articulated or in few cases, the strategies for carrying out the objectives.

It is to this end that Omotola (2009), noted the parties have found it extremely difficult to emphasize politics of issues. Rather, their mobilisation of popular forces has been largely driven by ethnicity and religion, as much as the influence of money as necessary driving force of the political process in general and electoral politics in particular. These forces, more than anything else, also determine the pattern of electoral victory of the parties. He further observed that the enviable roles of political ideology in party politics have been hijacked and perverted by the forces of identity notably ethnicity and religion as well as the influence of money politics. The implication has been that politics in Nigeria has become an elite dominated affair for the disempowerment of not only the masses, but also the state. This manifests in the forms of rising poverty, inequality and the persistent crisis of national integration and development,

with heavy tolls on the consolidation of democracy and the advancement of democratic principles, values and ideals (Omotola, 2009: 631).

Another manifestation of the lack of political ideology can be observed in the spate of party defection which appears to be a major issue that characterized the behaviour of political elite and a distinct feature of party politics in the Fourth Republic. According to Nwanegbo, Odigbo and Nnorom (2014), party members defect to other parties mainly to secure party platform or nomination to contest elections. The fact that most of the defectors especially from the ruling parties at the national and state levels later return to their previous parties gives credence to the position that defection was but an instrument for seeking political relevance and advance individual politicians' political interest in the scheme of things. Party defection which Ikechukwu (2008), refers to as political nomadism manifests in two forms in Nigeria under the Fourth Republic: the first is the mass movement of politicians from different political parties into the ruling party towards the time of the general elections. The idea is to belong to the mainstream party and thus participate in party primaries of the ruling party. The second type is the movement after the party primaries. At this point, those who lost out in the primaries of main parties move to their former parties or to new ones or even to form a new party under which they intend to contest elections. Ikechukwu (2008) notes that the direction of the nomadic movement is largely determined by the personal ambition of one or two seemingly great politicians to emerge as flag bearers and contest in the general elections. Usually such movements are massive as such politicians in their intent to be viewed as equal stakeholders will like to display their strong followership perhaps to the chagrin of the party from which they defect.

Furthermore, Nigerian political parties are characterised by a low level of party institutionalization both in terms of internal party democracy, cohesion and discipline. Omotola (2009) observes that this deficiency has also contributed to the decline of peaceful conflict management capacity of the parties at both the 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 has been able to hold itself together without conflict that most times threatens 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. According to Bola (2011), the lack of institutionalization of parties in Nigeria provides a fertile ground for sycophants and political praise-singers to have field day as they massage the ego of unprincipled incumbents even in the face of unpopular decisions and policies.

The activities of godfathers also contribute to the lack of viable political opposition in Nigeria. The activities of political godfathers are inimical to the sustenance of democracy in the country. As Edigin (2010) notes, apart from being antithetical to democratic consolidation in Nigeria, godfatherism aid the growth of pervasive corruption and undermine governance thus, it promotes

mediocrity and underdevelopment. This view is quite revealing as it unveils the problematic dimensions the phenomenon of godfatherism has assumed in Nigeria especially during the democratic dispensation under review. Experience has shown that godfathers who take charge of the affairs of political parties eventually constitute the monopolists that determine the outcome of governance. They accomplish that goal by taking (financial) control of the state through their godsons 'State Capture'. In all, this corruptive tendencies accentuated by patronage politics (godfatherism) has weakened political institutions most especially that of political parties and have served as hindrance to the performance of the functions of political parties including that of providing alternatives to the incumbent governments in the form of political opposition (Edigin, 2010).

Concluding Thought: Creating Viable Political Opposition in Nigeria

While the existence of vibrant and viable political parties is not the only prerequisite for the development and sustenance of democracy, political party remain a viable medium through which citizens express their preference for governmental policies and decisions. Political parties in a democratic setting perform very important roles which are central to the effective and smooth running of a democratic administration. Political parties in Nigeria's Fourth Republic have not been able to perform these functions effectively most especially in the area of standing as a viable political opposition. The Nigerian political history has been replete with weak opposition politics such that post-independence Nigeria has not witnessed the emergence of a strong and viable political opposition which could bring about positive change. This was informed by many factors some of which are: the fear of losing political office, lack of ideology, low level of political party institutionalization, and godfather politics among others. Nigerian political leaders have been bereft of a clear political initiative to develop and maintain a viable and constructive opposition platform.

Political parties in Nigeria, particularly those of the Fourth Republic have abandoned their critical role of serving as people's watchdog, ensuring the adherence to the theory of separation of powers and checks and balances and the principle of the rule of law. Their members lobby the incumbent government for juicy contracts once they lose election. Leaders of political parties who constitute the opposition after losing election see it as an opportunity to win the heart of the ruling party for sympathy. Most of them even completely defect to the ruling party just only to shamelessly return to their original party after falling out of favour with the ruling party. With this type of attribute exhibited by the political parties leaderships/stalwarts it will not be erroneous to conclude that opposition parties in Nigeria lack the necessary moral and ethical values as well as credibility to scrutinize unfavourable government policies.

While it remains a fact that the present Fourth Republic is the longest attempt the country has had in terms of democratic governance, it is equally important to note that the creation of a viable political opposition is important if the Nigerian fourth attempt at democratization would be consolidated and nurtured such that it will serve as the springboard for the qualitative improvement of democratic process. Nigerian opposition parties should try as much as possible to strike the difficult balance between being an enemy (the perspective in which the incumbent government sees them) and a contender for the government (the primary aim of opposition parties). Striking a balance in democracy between the ruling party and the opposition requires putting in place the necessary counterbalances to control the ruling parties' dominance by conferring rights on the opposition. In addition, Nigerian political parties should recognize the importance of establishing a political party on ideology. Nigerian political parties most especially in the Fourth Republic lack the ideological bases necessary for the proper functioning of such political parties. Furthermore, leaders of political parties need to engage in practices that will enhance party cohesion, discipline, and conflict management capacity. This is to ensure that the parties attain a high level of institutionalisation which is crucial to democratic development, sustenance and consolidation.

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