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POLITICAL PARTIES, FORMATION, DEVELOPMENT, PERFORMANCE AND PROSPECTS.

by

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Abstract

This paper x-rayed the origin, performance and prospects of Nigerian political parties in the nascent democracy. Using both historical and comparative methods we found that political parties in Nigeria unlike parties of other countries are ideologically deficient and as such cannot act as a catalyst to sustain democracy and good governance.

Key words - Political Parties, multi-ethnic, democracy, performance, prospects, fluidity.

Introduction

Political parties are an important institutional component of liberal democracy and electoral process. Parties produce the candidates, set the parameters of issues and agenda within which elections are to be fought and are furthermore expected to perform these duties one election to another¹. The growth of modern democratic practice revolves around political parties, which stand out as organized platforms for the articulation of aspirations and canvassing for electoral votes. While the idea of independent candidacy is practiced in some democracies, it remains an exception to the rule of political organization or the machinery through which government is formed and power is acquired. In some countries, especially the United States; the citizenry appears predominantly to be divided along the traditions or political orientation of being identified as either democratic or republican. In Britain, it is Labour and conservatives (Tories). Such political cleavages have grown and established themselves merely as a result of historical practice and emergence of little regulated political parties². However, the snag in Nigeria is that the reverse is the case. Nigerian political parties hardly lived long enough before they are terminated by military putsch. Their history too showed that they were ethnic based, while at the sametime suffered from ideological fluidity prevalent in Nigerian politics.

Whereas, in a plural and deeply divided society like Nigeria, the literature on federalism and democracy posit that the weapon for achieving unity and national integration is the requirement for existence of political parties that can achieve national spread, endure over time and perform the function of national development. But where political parties are allowed to mushroom everywhere in a plural society, they may at best advance highly antagonistic, acrimonious, divisive, visionless and limited local interests.

Conceptual and Theoretical Clarifications

There are write-ups on political parties, which has also acquired the distinctive name stasiology, i.e. the study of political, as a subject³. There is still robust disagreement among political scientists on how best to define a political party. L.O. Epstein so far suggest "almost everything that is called a political party in any western democratic nation can be so regarede"⁴. Apart from the ethnocentric bias obvious in the statement, there is a taunting disregard for precision in the assertion. His only proviso that loosely organized as it may be, it must seek to elect governmental office holders under a given label⁵. One of the oldest definitions of political party was that given by Edmund Burke (1729-1797)-"a body of men, united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principles in which they all agreed." This definition is based on principles (ideology) that is a party must exist to serve national and not some sectional interest.

This definition leaves out the main task of a party, which is capturing political power. Its weakness notwithstanding, it brought greater contribution to issue of party formation, i.e the promotion of national interests⁶.

Indeed, a modern political party must have a clearly stated ideology (whether capitalism, socialism or welfarism). Perhaps this explains why Malvern views political party "as an association organized in support of some principle or policy which by constitutional means it endeavours to make the determinant of government"⁷. In a nutshell, political parties are associations that serve, both as interest and pressure groups performing, the important functions of recruitment of political actors, mobilization of the citizenry and provision of choice alternatives for the populace organizing campaigning for votes.⁸

On the evolution of modern political parties LaPalombara and Weiner,⁹ notes that political parties are primary a phenomenon of the 18th century. In England, the modern party really got under way the organization of the local registration societies favoured by the liberals after the Reforms of 1832. In France and other European countries, the transformation of legislative cliques or political clubs into mass-oriented organizations is associated with the revolutionary year of 1848. in the U.S., which is which is generally regarded as the model of modern democracy, Parties with substantial following and stable structures appeared in the

1790s with the federalists of Hamilton and Adams and the Republicans of Jefferson and Madison.¹⁰

It needs be emphasized that there are three types of theories concerning party origin. They are – institutional theories – focusing on the interrelationship between early parliaments and the emergence of parties, historical situation theories that focus on the historical crises or tasks which system have encountered at the moment in time when parties developed, and finally, developmental theories that relate parties to the broader process of modernisation.¹¹

Historical and Comparative Review

The history of the development of political parties in Nigeria can be said to have begun in the early 1920s when the first political party was formed in 1923. This was made possible with the establishment of the Nigerian legislative council which extended franchise to Lagos and Calabar under the Clifford constitution¹². The party was named Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). By 1936, the colonial administration had frustrated the first generation of professionals and the intelligentsia sufficiently for them to see a common ground for them to cope with their predicament. Thus, in that year, they formed the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM). Although, both parties NNDP and NYM had aspirations which covered the whole of Nigeria, their operations did not go beyond Lagos and Ibadan.

However, serious groups (in the conventional sense) did not begin to emerge until after the world war 11 when Nigerian nationalists commenced their crusade for independence. An important party that surfaced at this time was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC). It was formed in 1944 and was the first political party aspired to spread over the whole country. This was led at inception by 'freedom fighters' like Herbert Macaulay, and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. NCNC was a mass party with membership opened to everybody. However, it was later to degenerate into a party that was identified mostly with Dr. Azikiwe's Igbo of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria.¹³ It did not advocate consistent ideological position except occasional 'Fabian' rhetorics. The party in relation to the Action group (AG), and the Northern People's Congress (NPC), which came later should be seen as a radical party. In other words, it should be placed on the left. Soon, political parties, which were (too many), clearly ethnic in origin, orientation and aspiration began. These were the Action Group (AG) and Northern People's Congress (NPC). The AG was formed to counter NCNC. It was an offshoot of Egbe Omo Oduduwa (lit. association of the children of Oduduwa, the mythical ancestor of the Yoruba).¹⁴ Explaining the rationale for its formation in 1951, its Leader, Obafemi Awolowo, said that he was concerned with stability in a multiethnic polity like Nigeria, and that such stability can come if ethnic conglomerates were formed. In a nutshell, A.G. epitomised Yoruba cultural fashion. It had two main aims: to bring and organize within its fold all

nationalities in the Western region so that they might work together as a group and submit themselves to party loyalty and discipline as well as to capture political power. The party did not grow beyond this except when it was expedient for it to form temporary alliances with others for electoral purposes.¹⁵ AG was a welfarist party, with no serious ideological commitment. It developed a schism in 1961.

The party was essentially a caucus one, which according to Richard Sklar draws its membership from businessmen and the intelligentsia; it was a well-organized party that perfected the art of party funding via dubious means of manipulating regional government structures to siphon resources to the party. This fact is well documented in the AG's hold on the West not total because the NCNC still including Ijebu-Ode. The support for the party extended beyond its ethnic enclave especially in Calabar, Benue and some other places. But the AG specialized in inciting minorities in other regions against the dominant groups. Hence, its alliance with the groups outside its base was with the minorities.

The third and perhaps the most influential party of the first republic was the northern people's congress (NPC), which could be said to have been formed in 1951 and somewhat like the AG was an offshoot of a cultural association, the Jamiyyar Mutanen Arewa (JMA) (lit. the association of people of the North).¹⁷ Unlike other two parties, membership of the NPC was restricted to the people of

Northern Nigeria's. In this respect, the party carried its ethno-regional character far beyond those of the other parties. It never laid claims to being a national political party. In fact, it regarded other areas of Nigeria as areas inhabited by "pagans" and "unbelievers".¹⁸ In practical reality; the NPC was the modern party of the era. The leader of the party was Ahmadu Bello, an advocate of the policy of 'one indivisible North.' He exhibited the affection of leading the federal was to take personal charge of the 'locale' of political power in the North.

Aside from the three dominant parties, there was J.S. Tarka's united Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), a party which spoke for the area from which it derived its name. Likewise, there was the United National Independent Party (UNIP) under the leadership of Eyo Ita, among several other ethnic parties. The only party at the time that could be said to boast of a significant pan-ideological orientation was Aminu Kano's Northern Progressive union (NEPU). Even so, it was still (like the NPC) a Hausa-Fulani's party. As for the ethnic minority groups, their leaders scurried further a field from their enclaves to seek representation in one or any of the other aforementioned parties. However, the 'big three' dominated the politics of the first republic. Saburi Biobaku, recalls the cut-throat competition for political power by these Big Three thus:

The dominant parties in the North and Southeast formed the government with that in the Southwest in the opposition. Each party represented the predominant ethnic group in its region and each incidentally controlled the government in its region.¹⁹

With the political parties championing ethnic causes, it was difficult for a conflict of interest not to arise. Hence, post-independence Nigeria reeled from one crisis to another, resulting in a bloody intervention by the military in January 1966, just six years after independence. Successive military rulers then began to run the 'show' until 1979 when civilian politicians got another shot at governance. Before that transition, there had been serious debates by constitutionalists as to what type of party system Nigeria should adopt. Based on past experiences, some argued for a zero party system. In the end, proponents of multi-partyism prevailed with the argument that it was more democratic than the other options. In line with this thinking, the various political associations emerging jockeying for power were required to fulfill stringent criteria as regards geographical spread before they could qualify for registration and the 'conversion' of the nation into a single constituency for the purpose of the presidential election. The political parties that went into the fray turned to be old wines (of the First Republic), which had merely been poured into new bottles. They were led by the same old breed politicians and drew their support from the same old regional power base. The demarcation of Nigeria into smaller states by the military made little or no impact on the polarization. The picture and character of second republic political parties was a testimony to this description.

In the Secondary Republic, after 13 years of military interregnum, the form and character cum the nature of political parties did not change much. The Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) emergence is to

intent and purposes as a reincarnation of the Action Group (AG), same founder (Obafemi Awolowo), same centre of power and almost identical ideology and organizational structure. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was almost a replica of the NPC too, except that its membership was by the old Northern aristocracy and the southern bourgeoisie. The NPN, however, was the conservative Nigeria national Alliance (NNA) fusion into a single party. The party was founded on the imperative of national unity anchored on the policy of zoning and rotation. The Nigerian People Party (NPP) was NCNC re-incarnate with Igbo heartland as its base but extended outside the Igbo enclave by capturing plateau state. Nnamdi Azikiwe who had led NCNC, also led the NPP. The Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP) was the aftermath of the quarrel of the Kanuri who had in the First Republic resented political hegemony by the Hausa-Fulani ruling class. Thus, Second Republic afforded them independence. It carried almost the same pro-Kanuri nationals as in the Borno Youth Movement (BYM). The Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) was the NEPU sort of. Its influence was restricted to Kano and Kaduna states. It is worthy of note that each political party was headed by their leaders in the first Republic. It is equally vital to note further, that the incessant instability that characterized Nigeria's politics between 1981 and 1983 was also traceable to various schisms which occurred in the UPN, PRP, GNPP and only very slightly in the NPP. These accentuated the tenure and the tone of political violence and electoral fraud that presented the rationalization of military take over in December 1989.²⁰

General Muhammadu Buhari, who took over from the civilian in 1983 did not last long enough in power to announce a transition programme. But his successor, General Ibrahim Babangida, resuscitated the debate on the best possible political dispensation for Nigeria. Of special interest to many, if not all, was how to break the present tendency of the country's main political parties to cling to the tripodal division of East, West and North. Thus, the Political Bureau set up by Babangida to fashion a new way forward recommended in its wisdom two-party system. The intention was to obliterate the old ethnic cleavages along political lines. But at the end of the day, two parties could not effectively integrate the country or last long to achieve that aim.

The aborted Third Republic witnessed the emergence of centrist parties. Thirteen political associations sought registration from the National Electoral Commission (NEC). The Peoples Solidarity Party (PSP), Nigerian National Congress (NNC), Liberal Convention (LC) and Peoples front of Nigeria (PFN) were the four main associations. The PSP represented the progressives, the NNC, a re-incarnation of the NPN, represented the conservatives. This development was aborted by the creation of two political parties by the government- the social Democratic Party (SDP), and the National Republican Convention (NRC). The NEC chairman, Humphrey Nwosu, claimed and rightly too, that the manifestoes of all political associations studied clustered around the centre of ideological spectrum, "a little to the left and a little to the right."²¹ NCE was mandated to use the manifestoes already submitted by the 13 associations to synthesize two

manifestoes for the SDP and NRC. This observation was obviously correct, but the decision to create two parties based on this observation was a serious error of judgment on the part of the military. There were political forces, which were neither progressive nor conservative, not to mention the fact that the government ought not to have created the parties by military fiat in the first place.

The rationale which Babangida sold to Nigeria and the wider international community was that with only two parties to choose from, the ethnic majority groups would have no option other than work together for better or for worse. It is how common knowledge that Babangida's political experiment, involving the imposition not just of political parties but of their manifestoes and ideologies as well turned out to be a farce and failed woefully.²² For the fact that the parties emerged like government parastatals, while members were strange bedfellows too and worst still Babangida himself who superintended over the conduct of the election annulled the election results.

The parties that were registered during the transition programme of General Sani Abacha were "five fingers of a leprous hand." The climax of Abacha transition demonstrated how unfit the parties were vis-à-vis national integration when they all adopted Abacha as a consensus presidential candidate. It was not surprising, therefore, that all political institutions put in place at the time of Abacha were pulled down with the coming of General Abubaker regime in 1998. His military administration also hurriedly put

together three political parties- the People Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples party (APP) and Alliance for Democracy (AD).

Party Politics (1999-2003)

As rightly postulated by Omo Omoruyi,²³ what we have had since 1999 in Nigeria as Political Parties (the Peoples Democratic Party(PDP), the All Nigerian Peoples' Party (ANPP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD) have nothing in common with the political parties of the First or Second or even third Republics. Their manner of origin did not fit into what we know from literature. The reason is that scholars of Nigerian political parties would want to know to what extent are the political parties that evolved in 1999 capable of providing alternative political order to the military in the minds of Nigerians? This is a legitimacy question, which is yet to be resolved in their operation since. Second is the crisis of integration. Scholars would want to know what extent the political parties that evolved in 1999 approximated the federal union. This is a political integration question, which is dealt with elsewhere. The third one is the crisis of participation. Scholars are interested in the extent to which the political parties that evolved in 1999 met the needs of those who want to participate in the political process. The snag with these political parties is that they could not meet Joseph Lapalombara's test that a political party is so called, if there is an inter-generational transfer of political affiliation. This is because there are many studies that link stability of any democracy to the inter-generational transfer of political affiliation.²⁴ The composition of the 1999 political parties

is fluid and unstable; they can be viewed as instrument of transition from military to civilian rule. A commentary on each of the three parties suffices to buttress these assertions.

Starting from the Alliance for Democracy (AD), it is essentially a Yoruba outfit committed to producing a Yoruba president in 1999. It did not meet the Federal Character clause in the constitution for it to be registered as a political party. Many people then felt that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) merely bent the rule in order to accommodate the party.²⁵ The military did this on national security grounds. It was dilemma of denying a voice to the Yoruba people after what they went through as a result of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections, believed to have been won by M.K.O. Abiola, their kinsman. Whereas, the military ought to have forced the Yoruba to seek other avenues for making themselves heard and participate in the transition programme. In the words of Omoruyi,²⁶ the military decided to err on the side of national security and allowed the highly ethicized political association to continue as a political party. This deficiency in party registration was evident in the performance of AD throughout the elections in 1999. Its identity was later submerged in the APP in the presidential elections on February 27, 1999, a situation which support the criticism that the political class is to blame for many of the electoral problems, the country has experienced. The party came to the field after jumping in and out of the PDP and the APP. By the time the party went to the market, it was too late to make a dent in any area outside Yoruba land. The Yoruba who gave it support

from the late period did so because the leaders of the party appealed to the Awolowo's base – a Yoruba socio-cultural and political group. In a federal arrangement like Nigeria, an ethnic party does more harm to national integration bid than good. By 2003, the party could no more found its feet when it lost five, out of six states it controlled from 1999 to the ruling PDP.

The APP arose from the self-succession outfit of Sani Abacha. Its founders had served as ministers or as aides in different parts of the country. This was why APP was fondly referred to as Abacha people's party. The same Yoruba group that initially went to the leaders of the PDP again went to the leaders of the APP still in search of commitment that the party would nominate a Yoruba as its presidential candidate. On the day of the inauguration of the party, the Yoruba leaders found the same instrument used by the military to annul the June 12, presidential election result, Arthur Nzeribe, in the platform of the new party. This was why they quickly left the venue of the meeting. With no time at its disposal, the Yoruba leaders with some who believed in the June 12 cause quickly regrouped to found Alliance for Democracy (AD). This process of party formation was far from the ideal.

The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) arose from sources. First were the so-called politicians who denied registration by Sani Abacha during his self-succession bid. This group called itself the G.34 Committee from the fact that the petition signed by 34 men and delivered to Abacha by S.D. Lar. Included in this group was Alex Ekwueme who thought the Igbo should use this as their

vehicle to the presidency. Second were those politicians who were former followers of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) who were not opposed to the self-succession of the military strongman but were not part of his machine. Nevertheless, this group called itself the All Nigeria Congress (ANC) and was led by S.B. Awoniyi. Third were those who were the followers of the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua as the Peoples Democratic Movement (PDM). This group had Tony Anenih and Abubakar Atiku. Four were those who called themselves social democrats with the name, Social Progressive Party (SPP). This was a collection of politicians from different parts of Nigeria that failed to make their positions felt in the party.

From the above picture, the PDP is a mixed bag of persons with diverse political backgrounds. To this extent, the foundation groups covered all and sundry political persuasion: conservatives, radicals and progressive.²⁷ Going back to our conceptual framework of analysis, this mode of party evolution devoid of people of like minds is not congruent to democratic virtues.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Whenever there is no ideological class as obtains in Nigeria, the tendency is for the parties to see themselves as forces competing in a multi-ethnic civil society. There is also the strong tendency for the parties to interpret competition in terms of the survival of the ethnic entities in which case political parties may have institutionalized ethnic solidarity rather than national outlooks.

An apt description of Nigeria's political parties and party systems up to the Second Republic is that given by Larry Diamond, who suggests that they tended to reflect ethnic and regional particularities too closely to provide a fresh, cross-cutting basis for political conflict.²⁸ Corroborating Diamond, Anthony Akinola²⁹ notes that the political parties of the First Republic were "severely limited in their capabilities to integrate the components of that great diversity of societies known as Nigeria." Indeed, as claimed by P. Chudi Nwazurike³⁰ they "barely passed the critical litmus test for competitive democracy- the willingness 'to play by the rules' in fairly and squarely seeking power across the nation through an intemperate electoral process":

The Nigerian pattern has exhibited virtually the worst forms of an unstable democracy. Most parties were narrowly based, tied to some great and unassailable leader who tended to stamp the organization not with any grand ideological vision but his personal biases. Besides, each was ethnically based, mass-mobilizing, and confrontational in orientation.³¹

All these problems and fears influenced the crafting of a new party system for the Third republic, an exercise that began with the setting up by the military regime in 1986 of the Political Bureau.

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