Review Article
The crisis of multi-party system and challenges of democratization in Nigeria

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Abstract

The challenge of building a credible and reliable multiparty system has plagued the Nigerian polity since independence. Using the political economy approach, this study explores primarily why it is difficult to establish multi-party system in the most populous country in Africa and identifies reasons why this undesired trend persists. The recent mass defection of top politicians from opposition parties like All Peoples Congress (APC) and Labour Party (LP) to the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the build to the 2015 elections typifies the situation. This study concludes by making a strong case for mutual tolerance based on politics of inclusion, openness and ideologically-driven mass parties that connects with popular aspirations rather than the current needs of the elites.

1. Introduction

Political parties remain very critical to democracy. This is because democratic participation and competition cannot be credible, transparent and consistent unless it is built around political parties. In developing countries such as Nigeria, the formation and evolution of political parties have been very contentious and complicated that most of the times, the judiciary or the military had to intervene. This is largely because the ground rules have never been well established and clearly articulated in a systematic way. More fundamentally, long years of authoritarian military rule have continued to exert negative effect on the manner political parties have evolved in the country. The return to civilian rule in 1990 notwithstanding, the crisis bedeviling political parties appears far from over and is increasingly damaging to the democratic process. Lack of internal democracy, chronic corruption and party indiscipline has further compounded the credibility of parties in recent times (Chikendu, 2003).

More disturbing is the tendency towards a one party state which is all the more ominous in a highly fragmented society. With this disturbing penchant for the politics of the mainstream, it is very difficult to see how multi-party system can evolve and prosper in a country as polyglot as Nigeria.

This portends a very dangerous trend for democracy and good governance in general.

2.The Essence of Political Parties

We begin this section by conceptualizing political parties as formal organizations that seeks to represent the aims and interest of different socio-economic forces in a political system. According to Nwoye (2005), political parties are the organizational embodiment through which candidates seeking for political office are recruited, assessed and nominated. The core aim of each political party is to prevail over others in a bid to capture state power or to maintain it.

Indeed, it is the goal of attaining political power that essentially distinguishes political parties from other social groups in the political system. Therefore, Political parties seek to organize and dominate the organs of government as well as provide national leadership under a common ideology and manifesto. That said, political parties exist in different forms in various political systems, and while not essential to the political process, it is difficult to imagine the political consequences of their absence in any political system, be it developed or developing.

In general terms, a party has the following characteristics; membership, organization, administration, objectives, and resources (to a greater or lesser degree) including funds and personnel. Most schemes for identifying types of parties often emphasize one or a combination of these characteristics and fall conveniently into three broad categories;

- Doctrinaire
- Organizational and
- Functional

Some parties especially in socialist systems tend to place much emphasize in nurturing and propagating core ideologies and value systems, while specifying the mode of distribution of power (Atwood, 2004). The communist parties in China, Cuba and Vietnam come to mind. In western democracies, the emphasis is on organizational and functional necessity of parties. The unique attributes in western parties includes their organizational structure in terms of hierarchy, internal discipline, clear ideological vision and mode of interaction with other groups within the system.

Finally, the party may be viewed in terms of the functions it performs especially in the process of campaigning, mobilization and establishing relationship with other powerful elites within and outside the government. In all these efforts, all political parties aim to capture or gain access to state power.

However, it is vital to note that in less developed countries especially Africa, the evolution of political parties is largely tied to popular nationalist struggles for political independence. These factors, along with military rule, have combined to shape the character and composition of political parties. These historical experiences continue to haunt party politics and the process of democratization up till now.

3.On Party Systems and Democracy

The structures of parties and the factors that assist in determining those structures are only one set of option which guides us in assessing how parties relate and function. Therefore the party system as differentiated from the notion of a party has been utilized as an analytic tool to explore both the conditions under which parties exist and function as well as their impact on the political system. Indeed the idea of a party system assumes that parties are linked horizontally and vertically to other socio-economic groups in structural and functional ways. Viewing parties from this perspective provides enormous latitude to explore other interactive dynamics such as the degree of interdependence and interrelatedness as well as patterns of alignments and realignments with other interest groups and elites in various other power strictures. Therefore, a party system is itself a subsystem of the larger political system, which in turn is clearly related to the socioeconomic, cultural, legal and other structures within the state. In this regard, is there a widely accepted theoretical frame of reference for analyzing party systems based upon empirically tested generalizations?

The simple answer is that none has been widely accepted as conclusive. However, Eckstein (1964) brilliantly summarized some basic analytic concepts in party systems analysis especially with reference to the problems of comparison and classification. In his view, political parties in all representative governments perform a unique function which is the operation of the electoral process. Parties discover the interests of the electorate and find candidates to represent those interests as well as work towards electing them to political office. In Nigeria's case, multi-party systems remain largely underdeveloped and fractured essentially due to a host of factors that have undermined the democratic process since independence. To fully appreciate these problems, we adopt the political economy approach as a theoretical framework in a bid to dissect the severe contradictions that have framed multi-party system in the country as well as the tendency towards one party state.

4.Theoretical thrust of discourse

Any serious analysis of party system in a developing democracy must as of necessity, acknowledge the enormous challenges that surrounds the Nigerian political economy. These challenges cannot be fully appreciated unless we locate it within a framework of analysis that exposes the severe contradictions of the country's neocolonial state and economy. In this regard, the political economy approach offers a very useful insight from which we can proceed to dissect these challenges facing party system and democracy in the country. As an analytic frame work, the political economy approach has developed within the general context of Marxism and relies a great deal on the conceptual apparatus and the methodological framework of Marxist theory. According to Ake (1981,1983), the influence of the theory has been so overwhelming that there is considerable argument as to where Marxist theory stops and the political economy approach begin.

Be that as it may, there is a political economy approach which is clearly distinguishable from orthodox Marxism despite its evident Marxist methodological thrust (Barongo: 1983). Therefore, it is important at this stage to point out some of the specific features of the political economy approach in order to appreciate its Marxist orientation and how it is extremely useful in the analysis of dependent peripheral economies such as Nigeria. The first feature of this approach is that it accepts the categories and theoretical assumptions of Marxist theory; to this extent it may be construed as a variety of Marxism. Secondly, the approach is very much interested in the nature and dynamics of capitalism as a global phenomenon especially the nature of relationship between centre and periphery and the specificities of peripheral capitalism across the third world. Third, political economy approach assumes that global imperialism even in the form of globalization has been and

remains a decisive influence in the evolution of dependent economies. Fourth, political economy approach also emphasizes the fact that social reality is characterized by dynamism and continuous change arising from the contradictions of human existence and the struggle to survive (Ake, 1981, 1983, Ekekwe 1986).

Finally, the approach pays particular interest in understanding human life and survival as a process that is mediated primarily by economic struggle and conflict and that any effort to understand it must be interdisciplinary and eclectic (Williams, 2004). A lot of criticism has been leveled against the political economy approach. Some Marxist scholars have even gone to the extent of rejecting it outrightly as a Marxist orientation without any theoretical foundation (Althusser, 1970). For instance, Beckman (1987), argued that the political economy approach overlooks the importance of historical specificities of peripheral capitalism especially the severe contradictions and class struggle generated by neocolonial capitalism as a mode of production in the third world. Others like Kay (1977) have argued that the approach does not even promote the cause of the oppressed social classes and it is too general to be of much analytic value as a theory. Nonetheless, they all acknowledged the fact that the political economy approach helped in no small measure to deepen the relevance of the economic factor as a crucial variable in understanding and explaining dependent peripheral economies (Barongo, 1983). Whatever the case, the political economy has brought into clear relief the contradictions of the application of Marxism to the historical specificities of the periphery (Ake, 1983 and 1996). Second, it has also deepened theoretical and ideological polemics within the neo-Marxist scholars by raising critical issues of class struggle and the specificities of revolutionary movements. When placed within the context of Nigeria's political economy, it becomes an important tool of analysis for understanding not only the severe contradictions that frame neocolonial politics and capitalism but also provides enormous analytic insight regarding the nature and dynamics of the post colonial state and classes in terms of their evolution (Ekekwe, 1986). In this regard, we can correctly argue that the country's protracted crisis of politics has very strong historical roots in the form of colonial legacy, reinforced as it were, by predatory military and civilian mis-governance since flag independence.

As a matter of fact, this crisis has different dimensions. There is the political and Socio-cultural dimensions of dependence on foreign models borne out of inferiority complex and the apparent supremacy of western civilization and imported values and techniques. This socio-cultural dependency is diffused through the education and information systems. It is also clearly reflected in political and social institutions, the dominant ideas of development, and in the relationship between citizens and the state; the dispossession and utter disregard of social and minority groups of their claim to the common wealth and control over their resources and despoliation of their environment. On the other hand, the economic dimension of the crisis historically originated with the destruction of the country's communal mode of production by the British Colonial rule, resulting in the introduction of export cash crops and later replaced with crude oil in the late fifties (Nwoye, 2001). This process effectively integrated the country's economy within the global imperialist system. This integration systematically provoked the steady distortion and external orientation of the country's economy represented today in the structural dependence and disarticulation of the country (Williams, 2004, Nwoye, 2005).

5.The Crisis of Multi-party System and Democratization in Nigeria

By using the political economy approach as a frame work for analysis, we begin to appreciate the complex political, social and economic realities that frame multi- party system and its politics in a dependent formation. Nigeria's historical evolution has been undoubtedly problematic. At independence in 1960, the country inherited a weak political structure and a defective and imbalanced federation, an intensification of ethnic consciousness and rivalries, a subverted indigenous ethos of government and culture and above all, an inexperienced leadership. Most of the apparatuses of state (a civil service not primarily geared to development; a police force alienated from the interest of the ruling class and increasingly torn apart by regional sentiments; and a judiciary wedded to the protection of the interests of the power elite), could not meet or support the aspirations of an emergent state. For instance, the parliamentary constitution did not contain adequate provisions for positive socio-economic transformation and national integration; it also encouraged regionalism. All the major political parties, important instruments for social and political mobilization, were ethnic based. The north/ south conflicts which had been husbanded by the British as part of their divide and rule tactics were so pronounced that they impacted negatively on all political decisions. Within each region, minority groups which genuinely and legitimately complained about the domination of the majority groups and sought relief in the creation of more states were either ignored or ruthlessly suppressed (Chikendu, 2003).

The second republic fared no better as the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) under the Shehu Shagari regime did all it could to engineer a one-party state. The buccaneering character of the party along with its mindless disregard for transparency and accountability complicated the democratic process and paved the way for another military coup that saw the emergence of Ibrahim Babangida on December 31st 1985.

The Babangida regime's effort to railroad the country into a two-party arrangement ended abysmally and in confusion. The country spent eight harrowing years enduring the callous chicanery that the junta foisted on a fragile nation in the name of a bogus transition programme. In the end, everything went up in smoke as a result of the June 12, 1993 annulment. To

save face in the wake of intense local and international pressures, a crude and inept interim national government (ING) headed by Ernest Shonekan, a transnational lackey, was wheeled into place to hold the fort while the military went back to the drawing board. The incipient crisis which his insincerity and hypocrisy wrought on the Nation, helped in no small measure to pave the way for another military coup on November 17, 1993 which saw a new Junta, General Sani Abacha, at the helm of affairs. The available record so far about his regime is so appalling that it would seem that successive leadership are deliberately working against the interest of the country.

Unlike the Babangida regime, the Abacha Junta made no pretense whatsoever of being democratic or partisan. In short, his regime marked the climax of unchequered corruption and human rights abuse in governance. Sparing no opposition, Abacha saw himself as the state and worked hard to ensure that the country's democratic credentials came to zero. The political class blinded by mindless greed and opportunism became willing accomplice in a tragicomic drama in which the goal posts are perpetually shifting. In the unending ritual of self-abasement and collective bastardy, different factions of the political class became eager to campaign for the Junta to run for president.

However, the sudden death of Sani Abacha on March 7, 1998 brought the grand charade to a halt. Abdusalam Abubakar who took over the reins of state power under a totally confused atmosphere was primarily interested in handing over power to a democratically elected civilian regime. With this good intention, the politicians who rallied round Abacha had to start a new round of political intrigue and horse-trading which eventually saw the emergence of a retired general and one time military head of state, Olusegun Obasanjo as civilian president in 1993.

From the above sketchy scenario, it becomes clearly obvious that complex factors have combined to shape the character and historical evolution of Nigeria's party politics. The most potent remains the destructive role of long authoritarian military rule that has disrupted the emergence of a vibrant and conducive environment for multiparty politics and democratization. Ake (1996) keenly recognized this fundamental African problem when he argued;

Because African society is at war, the specialists of warfare, the military have come to dominate it. That is the objective basis of military rule in Africa as well as the enormous influence of the military even in those African states which are not formally under military rule. The ascendency of the military is one of the great tragedies of Africa, for the military is nothing other than a highly specialized apparatus of violence whose salience begins when sociability has become impossible and civilized values no longer apply, when we must take to the "killing fields". That is why military rule is inherently and inevitably de-civilizing.

Under these circumstances, the Nigerian state is at best rarely able to function as a state whether under the military or even at present. This is because of the anomic and extremist pattern of political competition which all along has been very inimical to effective governance and the evolution of genuine multi-party system. It also explains the endemic nature of political violence and pervasive corruption in all spheres of life as well as the disarticulated and dependent nature of the economy.

As if this is not bad enough, the mercenary disposition of the Nigerian political class is another serious stumbling block to effective multi-party politics. Nwoye (2005) captured this syndrome well when he posited;

The primary concern at all times is to be part of the winning team and enjoy the sweetness of power whether by hook or crook. In short, the Nigerian politician live for today. To them, posterity is a distant fiction; it cannot deliver in the present. So, what does it matter? More than anything else, it is this kind of mercenary posturing and prostitution that creates the fertile ground for imperial presidency and all the abuses and corruption that goes with it (Nwoye, 2005).

From the above observation, it goes to show that the political class is primarily interested in acquiring power not to further the national interest but rather to satisfy its material greed. This has proved very disastrous for the country in the sense that party politics has come to be seen as warfare without any method and that what matters most is the calculus of force in a winner-takes-all arena that barely tolerates opposition.

The third factor that further undermines multi-party politics in Nigeria is the typical complacent attitude of the average Nigerian. Rather than confront the system that is seeking to put him down, he chooses to find a way around it. When we dissect this category of Nigerians, we begin to appreciate why Nigerians are complacent. A life of ease is an uncritical one. It does not ask questions; it does not raise eyebrows. It accepts every situation that presents itself. Those who live the life believe that things will hardly change. They accept what they assume to be their fate with resignation. They believe that they cannot, on their own, change the situation. They therefore prefer to let things be what they assume them to be rather than asking critical questions or taking steps that can alter the status quo. With the greater majority of the citizens firmly rooted in this life of helplessness and ignoble apathy, only a few out of the lot manage to bring a little effort to bear on their life of helplessness and boredom. These are those that try to make the best out of their situation. They seek to find some liberty and succor in a harsh situation by joining the winning party and singing praises in exchange for perfunctory gains.

After more than a decade of democratic rule, one can see this complacent attitude boldly inscribed in the forehead of most Nigerians. Rather than confront the bad system that is seeking to pull him down, they choose to find a way around the ugly situation. They are prepared to skip meals or forego a few

luxuries to make ends meet. But for how long and to what end? They do not seem to care about this. Since it is now a well known fact that Nigerians are made of this mould, the rapacious greed which rules those in positions of party authority and the state is getting more vicious and destructive even within the ruling party.

There is also the problem of intense parochialism which has engendered enormous ethnic cleavages along party lines. From independence till now, party politics in the country has been largely along ethno-religious lines. This has proved very disastrous for the country in the sense that it has discouraged the formation of truly national parties that cut across the whole country. Unless this trend is discouraged, it will be very difficult for vibrant multi-party system to flourish in Nigeria.

The issue of pervasive corruption in the country equally affects the emergence of genuine multi-party system in so many ways. There is no doubt that entrenched corruption is at the root of the country's intractable problems and has clearly frustrated the formation of a truly united country. In recent times, despite numerous institutions designed to check corruption, the epidemic appears unending and has clearly dented the subsequent administrations in so many ways. It has also complicated the emergence of genuine multi-party system by encouraging politicians to join the winning party in order to partake in sharing the national cake. The recent defection of top politicians from opposition parties like All Peoples Congress (APC) and Labour Party (LP) to the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the build to the 2015 elections typifies the situation.

The final factor that is inimical to multi-party system in Nigeria is the mindless materialism that appears to govern the country's political culture. We are living through a period of dramatic changes characterised by extreme erosion of moral and ethical standards. The society is no longer a moral family of families, where the upbringing of a child is not an exclusive parental obligation, but communal. The new media represented by the internet is now a major channel of acquiring moral knowledge. Worse still, some news-making moral tutors, entertainers and pop icons are devoted to subverting consensual codes of appropriate behaviour and debasing easy-to-fleece minds. As a result, we do not have a collective moral compass. Universal reference points of right and wrong are declining rapidly and everyone does as they please, even to the detriment of others. This has negatively affected political parties such that they no longer serve as cohesive instrument of mass mobilization and participation but rather as willing agents of state power in the service of narrow elitist interest.

For things to change for the better, the current political class needs to align their party objectives to four key principles. First, a consistent and sincere principle of all-inclusive politics that accommodates opposing and dissenting views regardless of party or ethnic affiliation. Second, there is also the urgent

need to encourage the development of other parties as well as support the evolution of democratic institutions and values.

This is absolutely necessary if the current democratic process is to succeed. Thirdly, the government should create conducive environment where young and promising Nigerians are encouraged to participate actively in the political process through political parties. The current trend whereby old hands are continually recycled, without regard to the feelings and aspirations of the upcoming politicians, rarely augur well for multi-party politics and for the country. Finally, there is grave need to encourage stronger party discipline and internal democracy. Without internal democracy and accountability, party politics becomes sterile and monotonous thereby creating room for mistrust, cynicism and apathy.

6.Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it is obvious that so many obstacles have conspired to make the attainment of effective multi-party system impossible in the country. This paper argues that long years of colonial rule and the over bearing character of neo-colonial state along with prolonged authoritarian military rule have imposed enormous obstacles to democratization and credible multi-party formation.

From independence in 1960 till now, multi-party politics have tended to favour politics of the main stream whereby one or two dominant parties dictate the pace and pattern of democratic politics often ending in military coup. This has proved particularly dysfunctional in the sense that it breeds fascism, intrigue, chicanery and ethno-religious bigotry and discourages effective multi-party evolution.

By using the political economy approach, we are in a better position to appreciate the fact that parties are creations of their political and economic environment and the way they perform their functions is shaped by historical realities as well as operative norms and values which govern the system. In this regard, the Nigerian party system and its disturbing tendency towards one-party dominance to the detriment of other parties is a clear pointer to the winner-takes-all mentality that has come to shape the Nigerian political culture.

There is no debating the fact that the open society, which all genuine democrats crave, is one that can thrive on the country's political landscape only when unfettered openness and tolerance is uncompromisingly made for opposing views and those who espouse them. Ideas are no less powerful and no less productive of visions of a better society only because they emanate from those on the minority or those outside the locus of power. When a mighty party bereft of vision and discipline bestrides the state and society and brooks no effective opposition on account of a dubious unity between the executive and legislative arms, there is bound to be monopoly of power, of ideas and options, itself an excellent recipe for authoritarianism and pervasive corruption.

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