

# The Contents And Discontents Of Party Politics And Democratic Experiment In Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Against the general notion of democracy as a means of popular participation, in Nigeria the populace have been systematically silenced by the oppressing forces of the government and grossly denied the opportunities to participate in debate on most of the critical socio-economic and political issues that have direct impacts on the citizen's lives. More often than none, few privileged individuals have continued to force their opinions and interests on the state without consideration for general interests. This schism according to Badmus, (2014) is due to the nature and structure of Nigerian state from inception which is characterised by intense struggling for political power, blatant disregard for the rule of law, gross corruption and high incidence of disregard for democratic values... Meanwhile, the political stability and development of any political system is a function of active involvement of the citizens in civic and

political matters, particularly, on issues affecting their collective interests. This paper argues that since the return of democratic rule in 1999, there has been high level of discontents among the general populace toward nature of democratic rule in Nigeria. This is due to the fact that democracy in Nigeria has continued to foster the interests of the few privileged as against the common interests and this situation has continued to threaten democratic stability and consolidation.

**Keyword:** party politics, democratic experiment, democracy, popular participation

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The legitimacy of government, political stability and development of any country is a function of the citizens' awareness and their positive involvement in civic and

political matters. This is the reason why Appadorai (2004) posited that democracy demands from the common man a certain level of ability, rational conduct and active participation in the government affairs. However, since the emergence of electoral politics in Nigeria, political activities and transition programmes have been marked with irregularities, uncertainties, violence, lack of trust in the government and its institutions. The forgone situation has further contributed to the challenges of democratic experiment in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Generally speaking, the citizens are fundamentally entitled to be involved in the political process and decision making through different ways such as; joining political party or any other organisations is are legally recognised, voting during election, participating in electoral campaign, engaging in community affairs, and occasionally criticise government when it become necessary. This is important; because the level and pattern of political participation of the citizens determine, to some extent, the success of the political system. Given the reality of Nigerian politics, many observers and scholars have concluded that, there is a lack of principles and ideology among many of the political gladiators in Nigerian

politics: this is due to the pervasiveness of undemocratic values within political space, prevailing ethnocentric politics, widespread of corruption and the culture of 'do-or-die' politics that have pervaded the entire political system in Nigeria. Thus, this study argues that to foster development and deepen democracy in Nigeria, the trust network between the government and the populace must be rebuild, electoral system must be restructured, members of political party, government officials and government at various levels must be reoriented and redesigned to embraced inclusiveness in governance, service oriented and must be immune against corruption.

This paper is divided into five segments: the introduction, political party and democratisation in Nigeria, the 2007 general elections experience, dilemma of political participation in Nigerian democracy, the discontents of democratic experiment in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, conclusion and recommendations.

## **2.0 POLITICAL PARTY AND DEMOCRATISATION IN NIGERIA**

In the opinion of Agbaje (1999) a political party is a set of leaders who try to organize and control the legislative and executive

branches of government. In essence, political party is usually established for the primary purpose of acquiring and retaining political power through legal control of periodic election; either singly or in coalition with other similar associations to ensure control over the personnel and the policy of the government of the state (Dowse and Hughes 1972). Put differently, political parties occupy an enviable position in the representative democracy by serving as mouth piece of the people in modern states through collation, venting of opinions and political preferences. As a matter of fact, political parties are the major hallmarks of democracy.

The 1990s witnessed the massive spread of what Huntington (1991) referred to as the “third wave” of democratization in Africa, including Nigeria, leading to emerging surge of multiparty politics. Undoubtedly, it became obvious that the mere adoption of party pluralism will not automatically advance the cause of democracy in country like Nigeria without conscious efforts to institutionalize certain governmental structures and institutional parameters to promote and sustain due process in terms of theory and practice of democracy (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1992).

More importantly, political parties in Nigeria are synonymous with elite groupings with diverse interests which may be totally different from advancing political and economic cause of the country. The fact that their elites nature has made them to be poorly entrenched in Nigerian civil society and create a gap between them and the masses. To bridge the gap, parties adopted a number of strategies. The first is the mobilization of ethnic identity through ethnic movements and use of ethnic leadership at the grass root level. The consequence of ethnic mobilization for electoral purposes in Nigeria is an institutional context where elections are transformed into highly competitive zero sum games. To confront the uncertainties resulting from the acquisition of political power through mobilisation of ethnic identity, political parties have resorted to patronage system and godfatherism to effectively deploy patronage and overcome the problems of voters’ compliance, which it generates.

The complexity of political parties as the prime mover of democracy has been overemphasised by many scholars, that neither democracy nor democratic societies are thinkable without them. They not only perform functions that are government related, such as making

government accountable and exercising control over government administration; and electorate related functions such as political representation, expression of people's demand through interest articulation and aggregation as well as structuring of electoral choices; but also linkage related functions, playing an intermediary and mediatory role between the government and the electorate (Moore, 2002). In a sense, political parties can only cope effectively with these responsibilities to the extent of their political institutionalization in terms of structure, internal democracy, cohesion and discipline, as well as their autonomy is sustained (Omotola, 2005; Egwu, 2005; Saliu and Omotola, 2006), because the relationship between political parties and the state is a complex one.

It is instructive to note that the party that forms the government, systematically become part of the institution of the state. Thus, it is almost impossible to draw a hard-line demarcation between the ruling party and state. Yet, the relationship should be well-defined such that political parties, especially the one in power, as a critical segment of both the state and society, can enjoy some reasonable degree of "societal support", the absence of which poses serious threats to "political

liberalization, democratization and democratic consolidation" (Tripp, 2001).

At the inception of party formation in Nigeria in 1923, precisely 24 June, 1923, following the introduction of the elective principle by the Clifford constitution, Nigerian parties had very limited and self-serving objectives. The main objective was perhaps, that of buying legitimacy for the colonial government through very limited franchise restricted to Lagos and Calabar. Richard Sklar, in his seminal work – *Nigerian Political Parties* – demonstrates articulately how the emergence of political associations such as the People's Union, was only in response to the prevailing realities of colonial administration (Sklar, 1963). Little wonder, when the first political party in Nigeria, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) emerged in 1923, under the leadership of Herbert Macaulay, its activities were restricted to contesting elections into the Lagos city council.

For years, the UNDP was hegemonic in its dominance in electoral politics in the country. This was to be challenged by the Lagos Youth Movement - latter Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM)- formed in 1934 and defeated the NNDP for the three seats allocated to Lagos that year. By 1944, the

increasing tempo of nationalist agitation had resulted in the formation of another political party – the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (CNCN), under the leadership of Herbert Macaulay and later Nnamdi Azikwe (Sklar,1968). This was followed, in quick succession, by the transformation of the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, a Yoruba socio-cultural organization, into a political party, the Action Group (AG) in 1950 under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the Northern People Congress (NPC) in 1959 with dominance in the northern region. By 1951, a breakaway faction of the NPC consisting mainly of radical youths based in Kano formed the Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU). These parties dominated the political landscape of the country particularly in their respective regions in the march towards independence and in the First Republic (Dudley, 1973).

Although the Second Republic (1979 – 1983) witnessed the emergence of more political parties, there was no much difference with what obtained under the First Republic. Rather, what happened was the reincarnation of parties of the First Republic under different nomenclatures with some additional parties. The parties included the National Party of Nigeria

(NPN), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) replacing the NPC, AG and NCNC, respectively. Others were the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) and Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP), and later Nigerian Advance Party (NAP), which was registered in 1982, after failing the first round in 1978 (Osaghae, 1998). These parties constituted major actors in the Second Republic. Under the aborted Third Republic, there was a fundamental change in the mode of party formation in Nigeria. This pertains to the official formation of parties by the state after a series of experiments with different political associations (Oyediran and Agbaje, 1991).

The parties were the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC), the former being a little to the left and the latter a little to the right (Omoruyi, 2002). This development, executed after the dissolution of the thirteen associations that applied for registration has been as part of the grand design to execute a “hidden agenda” to perpetuate the military regime in power (Osaghae, 1998). The eventual annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election by the military regime of general Babangida lends some credence to this claim. The country once again returned to

multi-party democracy in 1999 following the transition inaugurated and successfully completed by General Abdulsalm Abubakar. Initially, three political parties – Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP), later All Nigerian People Party (ANPP), and the Alliance for Democracy (AD) were registered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). By December 2002, the number of registered parties rose to thirty (30), while additional three political parties were registered in January/February 2006 (Simbine, 2005).

The above prognosis presupposes the opening up of the political space for democratic opportunities and development in Nigeria. However, in reality, the opportunities associated with such openings are yet to be positively exploited for the political development of the country. This may not be unconnected with the poverty of ideology that characterizes Nigerian parties as discussed in the next section.

### **3.0 THE 2007 GENERAL ELECTIONS: A TURNING POINT IN NIGERIAN POLITICAL HISTORY**

The 2007 elections marked a turning point in Nigeria political history: as the most

criticized election ever held in Nigeria since the inception of the Fourth Republic. This is because of the obvious flaws and frauds that characterized the 2007 elections. Although, the 2007 election recorded the first successful transition from civilian to civilian rule, but the level of violence that pervaded the pre-election, during election and the aftermaths of election left not many in doubt about the irreparable damages this particular election democratization process and experiment in Nigeria. The non-partisanship' of INEC as an unbiased umpire was seriously in doubt. To a greater extent, every aspects of the 2007 election were marred by irregularities. There were pronounced internal crisis that cut across all the political parties that participated in the 2007 elections. Notable among the internal party crisis was the case of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) being the ruling party: lack of consensus and party discipline result in many litigations challenging the authenticity of many of the party' s candidates that emerged from primary elections, intimidation and harassments of oppositions. The foregoing thereby impacted negatively on the credibility of the electoral process and elections at large. The fraudulent nature of the 2007 election was put in proper

perspective with the numbers of annulments and reruns elections declared by various election tribunals.

The most violent elections came up in 2011. This election also was also one of the few elections to be postponed due to poor logistic planning. It was however the best election since the election held in 1999. The conduct of election also came up within improved legal parameters and ensured that the needed instrument autonomy was available. Indeed, there was reduction 'n the number of litigations in the tribunals compared to the 2007 elections. The election was hailed both nationally and internationally. The sore point of the election was the violence that erupted at the close of the process in which 1000 lives were lost (IGC, 2007). The violence seriously discredited the electoral process. The Corps members who were employed ad Ad-Hoc staff were severely disadvantaged as some of thorn especially in the North lost their lives in the violence that ensued as a result of the election.

The 2015 elections led to the merger of few political parties specifically the ACN, CPC, a faction of ANPP and a faction of APGA to form the All Progressives Congress (APC) to contend against the ruling party, the PDP. The election can be

said to be the country's first technological driven election. The first influence came from the use of card reader which has never been used in electioneering in Nigeria since the country's adoption of democratic rule. The 2015 general election in Nigeria were tremendously influenced by social media/ information communication technologies such as mobile phones, SMS, Facebook, blog, snap chat, instagram and Twitter among others particular for campaign purposes, propaganda, election monitoring and observation. To some extent, many unemployed youths gained temporary job opportunities as "internet warriors". Some internet warriors of the then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) were earning as much as N100, 000 – N250, 000 monthly per person to attack and malign the All Progressives Congress (APC) opposition flag-bearer Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (retd), in the presidential race on Facebook, Twitter, blog, instagram, websites of some popular Nigerian newspapers and other social media as reported in the international news media on the BBC and CBC (Letter From Africa, 2014.).

Nigeria's March 28, 2015 presidential election was, perhaps, one of the most bitterly contested in the annals of the

Nigeria's electoral history. The election occurred after a controversial six-week postponement following insistence by security agencies that it should be pushed forward for them to accelerate the battle against the insurgency in the North East. It was possibly the most divisive election, drawing Nigerians into a devious web of mudslinging as well as ethnic and religious chauvinism. Eventually the election turned out to be largely a referendum on key national issues pertaining to the state of the country's economy and security. This historic election was fought-and-won by Nigerians who appeared to have crucially determined to assert their position as the real employers of those in power, and on whose behalf and on whose benefits power should only be exercised but the contributions of info-tech cannot be overemphasised. The election has been a revelation on how best to exercise the franchise of Nigerians. The utilisation of the biometric capabilities of permanent voter's cards and card-readers makes the polls in Nigeria's first technologically compliant elections, with a greater degree of success, despite initial hitches and distraction.

The subsequent perfection of the biometric voting system in Nigeria would clearly improve the integrity of elections in

Nigeria. The election was historic because for the first time in the country's history, it was the first time an incumbent president was defeated in the polls. It is a huge signal bursting the presumed invincibility of our leaders. Now that Nigerians have demonstrated that they can remove ruling presidents through the electoral process, the accountability of leaders to the people is placed on the agenda. Poor governance can henceforth be sanctioned through the ballot: this simple civic message on the power of the electorate could be a decisive turning point in consolidating our democracy. It is also important to note that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and its Chairman, Professor Attahiru Jega, were heroic in the conduct of the 2015 elections. They were able to deploy technology to achieve credible, free and remarkably fair elections, while maintaining calm in the turbulence of a sensitive electoral process. Their foresight in introducing the technology that improved the electoral process earned them the respect and admiration of Nigerians.

#### 4.0 DILEMMA OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERAN DEMOCRACY

As observed by Eakin cited in Adelekan (2010) political participation is the process through which the individual plays a role in the political life of his society and has the opportunity to take part in deciding what common goals of the society are and the best way of achieving these goals. Similarly, political participation has also been described as an aspect of political behaviour and it focuses on the way in which individuals take part in politics (Akamare, 2003). Thus, political participation is a voluntary activity and one may participate directly or indirectly. The various ways by which the people can be involved in the political system include selection or election of political leaders, formulation of policies, community activities and other civic engagements. As rightly observed by Arowolo and Aluko (2010), the essence of political participation in any society, either civilized or primitive, is to seek the control of power and to influence decision making.

In essence, the primary motive behind political participation is to contribute ones quota to the political system and overall development of the nation. Therefore,

political participation is one of the fundamental requirements of democratic governance. This is the reason why Adelekan (2010) emphasized that ideally, democracy should means individual participation in the decisions that involves one's life. Consequently, in ideal democratic system, it is a necessity for the citizenry to be fully involved in the democratic procedures for the selection or election of political leaders and engaging in effective communication of the public policies. In the same vein, any claim to democratic regime or representative democracy must essentially embrace a high degree of competitive choice, openness, civic and political liberties... (Arowolo and Aluko, 2010).

Meanwhile, the extents to which people participate in the political system differ from person to person. To Falade (2008) there are six types of political participants, these are: the inactive type: this consist of those people that take no part in any political activity; voting specialists: these are the people that eagerly engaged only in voting exercise, besides voting, they are not concerned about other political activities; parochial participants: these people participate in politics occasionally. They vote or get involved in any other political activity only when it affects their

personal interest; the communalist: these are the people who get engaged in voting regularly, they also get involved in community affairs but they are not involved in political campaign activities; the campaigners: they are actively involved in political campaign but inactive in other community affairs; complete activists: these people are highly involved in all political activities. They actively participate in voting, political campaign, community activities and make contact with public officials.

Virtually in most political systems, some of the factors that determine political participation includes: cultural, political, religion, economic, and educational level of individual citizens. Similarly, the extent of political awareness and the level of trust in the political process also play major roles in measuring the level of citizens' participation in political process within their given country. Given the nature of Nigeria politics, the involvement in political participation is often influenced by monetary gain, ethnic affiliation, and religious cleavages.

Religion and ethnic sentiments have continued to dominate the pace of politics in Nigeria since her independence in 1960. As rightly observed by Albert Legogie,

former deputy Senate President, in every election there seems to exist a big gulf: a dichotomy between the North and the South and between Christians and Muslims (Adeyemo, 2011). For instance, the post-election violence that usually occasioned every presidential elections since the beginning of the Fourth Republic particularly in the Muslim dominated Northern part of Nigeria, the Southerners, majority of whom were Christians were attacked usually and killed, while many churches were burnt. Above all, at the every political crisis that usually occasioned election period in Nigeria, the political elites exploited the weaknesses of the masses through mobilisation of the later along ethnic and religion affiliation which serve no purpose for the benefits of the masses.

As argued by Falade, (2007), politics in Nigeria is regarded as a dirty game and it is practiced with bitterness, hatred, rancour and other associated evils. In view of Falade observation, the implications of this on Nigeria polity are the vicious cycle of political crises and instability, deceit and failed promises by political office holders which usually discouraged well meaning citizens from participating in election and other political activities. In the same vein, in a research conducted by Adelokun,

(2011), one of the respondents interviewed during the 2011 election expressed that “I have come to the sun to suffer, even though I am not benefiting anything from the government...I don’t even have any confidence in them, because they have been failing us generally”. The conventional wisdom deduced here is that, the incentive to actively participate in political activities has been suffocated by the parasitic nature of political elites in Nigeria, therefore leaving the citizens in a state of confusion and voicelessness.

Consequently, the low level of political participation among the Nigerian citizens becomes inevitable due to undemocratic nature of political leadership. In many national issues that demands active citizen participation, many Nigerians have become indifferent in such political matters. The INEC noted that Nigerians’ participation during the 2011 general elections was low. Only 35% of the 70 million registered voters took part in the election. The low participation in 2011 general elections according to Friedrich Elbert Stiffing Foundation were due to lack of transparent elections, election violence and politicians’ noncommittal to their campaign promises as major reasons for voters’ apathy in the country (Odebode, 2011).

The political apathy in Nigeria has also been linked to the twin problems of ignorance and deliberate deception by some politicians. The consequence of this is the inability of the masses to establish the connection between their state of underdevelopment and their non-participation in the electoral process (Fabiya, 2010). In the light of this Falade (2007) concluded that the Nigerian political culture has not given room for the entrenchment and sustenance of true democracy.

Unfortunately, the level of political apathy among Nigerian women is highly worrisome. However, the 1985 Beijing declaration to which Nigeria is a signatory provides that 30% of all positions in government should be given to women in order to encourage women participation in politics. To Cuku, (2009) the marginal involvement of African women in the political process results from the lingering inhibitive cultural and patriarchal forces against women’s engagement in politics that characterized African traditional societies.

## 5.0 THE DISCONTENTS OF DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENTS IN NIGERIA

Locating Nigeria's efforts at democratization would require a re-examination of the historical events that led to creation of Nigeria as country. The 'forceful and insensitive' amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates by the British colonialist had done more damage than good to the foundation of Nigerian society even before the granting of independence in 1960. It is instructive to note that different entities that made up of the current Nigeria had various systems of governments before the advent of the British imperialists in 1861. Different nationalities had existed with their respective and distinguishing values, traditions, cultures, norms, and in fact governmental system. These nationalities had relatively achieved different levels of economic and socio-political developments before colonial infiltration and eventual destruction of those legacies (Akinboye and Anifowose: 1999).

Therefore, the amalgamation of Southern and Northern protectorates is tantamount to inconvenience marriage of unwilling couples which eventually manifested democracy and state failure in the post-

independent period. The relationship between the North and South from inception has been characterized inter alia with mutual suspicion, distrust, hatred, competition, deep animosity, occasional violence, sectionalism and ethnic chauvinism till date. In essence, any democratization effort based on the foregoing relationship among various nationalities that made up of the country posed serious danger to peaceful coexistence and democratic consolidation at large.

In the same vein, the nature and character of the Nigerian state have not equally helped democratisation process given that holding and wielding of political power translate in to opportunities to dictate the distribution of largest, personal aggrandizement, access to embezzle state resources and avenue to manipulate the state institutions including the legal framework for private gains. The post-independent Nigerian state mirrored the Nigerian state under colonialism. As right observed by Young (1988), Nigerian state during colonial era was oppressive, exploitative, and authoritarian in its conduct and was not in a position to bridge the gap between itself and indigenous Nigerian people. Young further argued

that, this was due conqueror nature of colonial administration.

Unfortunately, local elites that inherited the post-colonial Nigerian state continued with the authoritarian and alienating nature of the colonial administration: purposely for self serving interests of the emerging political elites. The self-serving nature of emerging state in post-colonial period were made possible as a result of the fragile nature of the Nigerian state encapsulated with weak institutional capacities to discharge state functions without fear or favour. Successive political leaders in Nigeria have continued to personalize state power and exploited the weakness governmental apparatuses to the detriment of socio-economic development and democratic consolidation. State institutions and apparatuses including the police, election management body, judiciary, anti graft agencies, military as well as other critical political institutions of the state have been infiltrated by corrupt political leaders which in return magnified the weaknesses and incapacity of state institutions to strengthen democracy and good governance in Nigeria.

The foregoing political situation in Nigeria has led to widespread of public dissatisfaction, lack of confidence in the

government and its institutions, bad governance, poverty, corruption and the current economic recession: all the problems highlighted and many others have result in political apathy and national disloyalty- the pathologies which have impeded on democracy and democratic good governance in Nigeria.

## **6.0 CONCLUSION**

Conclusively, it is instructive to note that the concept of democracy is predicated on viable and reliable elections and functional party politics. The centrifugal politics, personal aggrandizement, weak governmental institution, personification of state power by political elites, corruption, ethnicity and the foundation of Nigerian state rooted in colonial trajectories among others have all impacted negatively on the functionality of the state, democracy and efforts at achieving good governance. The implications of foregoing on Nigerian state has been lack of trust network between the populkace and Nigerian government, incessant civil unrest and occasion public protest against government policies and its institutions.

## **7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Election and electoral process should be free, fair and credible in such a way that, today's winners may be become tomorrow's losers and today's losers could become tomorrow's winners in order to guide against possible threats to sustainability of democracy and the good governance in Nigeria.
2. Nigeria is caught up in the precarious and pathetic situations therefore, there is an urgent need to redress the failings of Nigerian political system, if democracy must be sustained and consolidated in Nigeria. It is necessary to reconcile the disjuncture between Nigerian peculiarities and the inherited institutions as well as socialization structures upon which Nigerian democratization experiment are anchored. As long as these structures remain the platform upon which Nigerian democratization thrives and developmental strategies are anchored, all developmental drives may appear like putting the cart before the horse and to that extent, turn out to be an exercise in futility. Therefore, there is urgent need for

adaptability of mechanism to make the democratization process amenable to realities of Nigerian politics.

3. The process of consolidating democracy in Nigeria must guarantee a synergy between the government and the governed. There is also a need to re-invent and reposition democracy and democratic process in Nigeria.
4. Generally speaking, the trend in the world is towards sustaining and consolidating democracy. Meanwhile, Nigeria democratic agenda as rightly observed by Kolawole (2004) must aim at evolving, guaranteeing and sustaining an enduring democracy. For democracy to have any meaning, government must be accountable to the people, not only for the resources and power they control, but for the very policies they formulated and executed. In this respect, if there is so much faith in democracy, it is because of the 'belief that democratic political processes will make the state perform better in interest of the general public, curb corruption, rationally and fairly allocate

resources and secure for the individuals a dignified place within the civil society.

5. There is need to reduce the materialistic nature of Nigerian politics if the country want to consolidated her staggering democracy. It is true that the financial stakes in an election these days have gone to the level that only those who have tasted power previously or work with government at juicy capacities/positions which avail him/her the opportunity to amass are capable of pursuing political ambitions in Nigeria. For instance, since the Nigeria's Third Republic in 1992/93 to the present time, we have witnessed and still witnessing recycling of the same groups/caucus of politicians who have either looted public funds or cohorts of the looters reproducing themselves to occupy various elective and appointed political positions.

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