POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION: NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract
Political parties are of pivotal importance to democratic consolidation. Political parties provide the platform for the aggregation and articulation of interests in societies. They also provide the vehicle for the recruitment of persons in political offices. However, if not well handled, they can also be the albatross of democratic desires and aspirations. It is this wise that this paper takes a critical look at the relationship between political parties and democratic consolidation because of their ethnic/regional nature. Parties of the third were firmly under government control and so could not positively impact on democracy. For the fourth republic, it can be argued that there is a clear dominance of one political party which is the PDP. In the opinion of the authors, this drift towards a one party state does not augur well for democratic consolidation.

As the wind of democratic governance blows across the as the most generally accepted mode of civil governance as opposed to autocratic government, one indispensable ingredient of democracy remains the existence of political parties. This can better be appreciated if considered against the pivotal role political parties play in nurturing a democratic system. Wise and Otoghile (1996:95) had this in mind when they observed that:

The study of political parties has occupied a prominent place in the development of political science as an academic field of study. The concern of scholars and statesmen about the need to democratize the machinery of government has partly been responsible for its prominence.

The assertion above captures the central role political parties play in the survival and nurture of any political system that is anchored on democratic principles. In the words of Joseph Lapalombara and Myron Wiener (1966) wherever political party has emerged, it appears to perform some common functions in a wide variety of political systems at various stages of social, political and economic development. This fact is better appreciated if considered against the backdrop of the fact that political parties are
Present in all political systems with democratic system as no exception. Joseph Lampalombara was apt when he asserted thus:

*Political parties today are omnipresent: They are centrally important to Anglo-American democracies and to dictatorial systems like the Soviet Union. We find them in the most recently emerged tiny African and Caribbean nations and in system of continental proportions like India and China (1944:15).*

As an organization that mobilizes voters on behalf of a common set of interests, concerns and goals, political parties shoulder the onerous responsibility of shaping the course of any democratic system. The way it plays this role, determines whether it would be able to consolidate democracy or not. It is in view Of this that this paper would carefully examine the role of political parties in the consolidation of democratic ethos in Nigeria. As a group of people with shared interest desirous of capturing governmental power so as to control government, political parties are expected to conduct their affairs in a manner that will apart from promoting democratic ideals, consolidate same. With this in mind, we will carefully examine the concept of political party and how same helps consolidate democratic ideas in Nigeria: This would be done paying close attention to the views expressed by different scholars as to what a political party is, its type and functions that can help consolidate democracy.

**Political Party: A Conceptual and Functional Viewpoint**

As a concept in the social sciences, political party has been subjected to varied ‘interpretational viewpoints. These definitions are due to the fact that political parties possess variety of characteristics that make them difficult for a “one and for all” definition. The characteristics include among other things, organization, the goal to capture political power, membership configuration and core feature of common that interest that binds their members. The result is that a definition offered for the concept may succeed in capturing in varying degrees, different aspects of the concept. It is however important for us to know that most scholars tend to emphasis the goal of political parties to acquire political power in their bid to define the concept.

Furthermore, the existence of other organizations such as civil society and interest groups that are closely related to political parties, tend to make it difficult to define the concept. The political scientist in this respect, shoulders the onerous responsibility of defining political party in a way that the features which distinguish it from interest groups for instance, would be made known to he layman. The existence of different party systems and the variety of ways in which: political parties operate in these systems, make a definition of the term political party problematic. This makes the search for an embracing definition for the concept an inevitable venture. A careful look at the various definitions scholars offered for the concept would help demonstrate how scholars made conscious efforts to solve the problem thrown up by the difficulty in providing an acceptable definition for the concept.
According to Macliver (1967), a party is defined in a traditional way as “an association or organization in support of same principles and policies which by constitutional means, it endeavours to make the determinant ones of government. This definition was lucidly explained by Chambers (1963) when he outlined the sterling characteristics of political parties. He equally contended that modern political parties are characterized by a relatively durable or regularized relation between leaders and by continuing procedures for performing the key functions of selecting candidates managing public business, by the range, density and stability of their support and by a distinguishable set of perspectives with emotional overtones.

On their part, Lapalombara and Wiener (1966) saw political party as a formal organization whose self-conscious, primary purpose is to place and maintain public office, persons who will control alone or in coalition, the machinery of government. This definition coincided with Schumpeter’s definition, where he contended that the principal aim of any politic is to prevail over the others in order to get into power or to stay in it. (1961). This cleverly underscores the very essence of political parties. It is in doing this that they help develop democratic ideas and consolidate same. This is because a political party remains a group with common views on certain political means.

From all the definitions given above, a political party can be described in terms of the purpose for which it is organized, the character of its membership, the structure or the functions (Duverger, 1955:5-12).

Despite the prominence of political parties across political systems, political scientists have come to recognize the fact that political parties do not just emerge. Their emergence is the product of a combination of factors. These conditions have been clearly spelt out by Chambers (1963) who contend that political parties emerge as a result of the following reasons:

1. The emergence of significance national or common political objectives that influence the decision making centers tangentially.
2. The development of complexity within the political system that leads to emergence of diverse groups and conflicting structures anchored on opinion and interest that varies.
3. Emergence of social structures and ideological tradition that utopianism capable of encouraging popular political participation and involvement in political party activities by extension.
4. A sense of felt need to develop political structures or to establish between leaders and popular followership especially when leaders and hold on to power to perform governmental functions.
5. Major constitutional development that encourages formation of a political party. This happened in colonial Nigeria when the electoral principle was provided for the Clifford’s Constitution of that year.

We can therefore say that political parties are aggregate social forces with the imprint and characteristics of individuals and groups. This represents and signifies parties that originate as an act of free will among the people and groups sharing same
vision. It is on the basis of the shared vision that political parties help nurture democracy or any enduring governmental system built on the conduct of election on periodic basis. Political parties wield enormous influence the political cum democratic landscape of any country. The failure of a political party to live up to the responsibility of politically educating the people and mobilizing them for elections, always leads to the collapse of democratic institutions and processes.

**Political Objectives and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: An Episodical Statement**

Political party like we have seen so far plays pivotal role in the nurture of a democratic system. While this is a truism, it can equally be observed that the failure of same to be alive to its responsibility could set a democratic system in disarray. When this happens, democracy cannot be said to have been consolidated. In this section and central to our subject of study, we will consider the role of the political parties in the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. For clarity and orderliness, political parties which debuted in 1923 when Nigerian National Development Party (NNDP) came on board in Nigeria, will be considered on episodical basis starting with the first republic and ending with the fourth republic of today (2010).

**Political Parties in the First Republic**

Political parties world over, play pivotal role the democratization process of any nation. This is also true of the Nigerian historical evolution especially in the first republic that spanned between 1960 and 1966 when the first military coup occurred.

History of what came to be known as political party in Nigeria can be traced to 1923 when the Clifford constitution made provision for the elective principle that triggered formation of the first political party in Nigeria. This birthed democracy in Nigeria. Nationalist pressures quickened the pace of constitutional development in Nigeria. This in turn, led to the development of political parties in the country. The political consciousness that came with the rise of nationalist movement in the country especially among the educated elites was unprecedented. This led to demand for independence as well as alteration of the constitution Chang to the constitution led to the adoption of the Clifford constitution in 1922 that provided for the elective principles for the country.

Some political parties that featured in the first republic included the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) formed by Herbert Macaulay and his co-travellers in 1923. Others include the Nigerian Youth Movement, the National Council for Nigerian Citizens, the Action Group, the People’s Congress.

**Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP)**

As the first political party in the evolutionary history of Nigeria dating back to colonial times, this political party occurred simply as a child of circumstances. The circumstance that led to the formation of this party in 1923 was the nationalist struggle.
against colonial domination in Nigeria. The struggle birthed 1922 Clifford constitution that accommodated elective principle for Lagos and Calabar. This opened the leeway for party politics in the country and the formation of political parties as a vehicle for representative democratic experiment. As the first party in Nigeria, the NNDP was lampooned for its failure to carry its activities beyond the urban areas of Lagos and Calabar and for its purely elitist posture. To this extent, the party was seen as a “Lagos party”, thus limiting the ability of the party to nurture democracy beyond the urban centre of Lagos and, not even Calabar that had a seat allotted it in the elective principle that birthed the party in the first place.

The Nigerian Youth Movement
This began as Lagos Youth Movement formed in 1934. It became a Full-fledged political party in 1938 when it contested the Nigerian legislative council elections of that year. According to Ikelegbe (2005), the party was peopled by eminent nationalist figures such as Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, H. O. Davis, S, Akinsanya. etc.

The party as Nwajoku (1983) noted, was float out of the LYM principally to challenge the NNDP’s political dominance in Lagos at this time. This party also lacked national spread and had her interest embedded in the LYM, the mother body from where it sprang in 1938 as a political party.

The Action Group (AG)
This party was formed out of the Yoruba socio-cultural group, Egbe Omo Oduduwa in 1950. This gave the party both regional and ethnic toga. Formed in 1945, the Yoruba socio-cultural group had a leading light in personality as late Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The party did not pretend about her defence of the Western interest and as such, failed the acid test of democratic consolidation as it fanned the members of regional interest at the expense of national interest. This problem still bedevils the Nigerian state today. The Egbe Omo Oduduwa acted as a political core for the west and it was inconceivable to try to separate it from the political party at birth in 1950.

Northern People Congress (NPC)
Like the AG, this party was also an offshoot of a Northern based socio-cultural cum political organization, Jamiiyya Mutanan Arewa in 1951. NRC held sway in the north with its leader Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduana of Sokoto as premier of the Northern Region, in firm control. Though it had a regional toga as the AG earlier considered, the party helped champion the political interest of the North. This further consolidated the ethnic politics AG as a Western based political party started. This development and the failure to evolve practical ideological basis for existence of a political party, aided the demise of the first republic in Nigeria.

The National Council of Nigerian Citizen (NCNC)
This began as National Council for Nigerians and Cameroon. It had late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe as its arrow head and differed from the other political parties that had
regional affiliation. Though NCNC was seen by many as an Ibo party, but it had what can be seen as fairly national spread. The NCNC was a nationalist political party both in organization and philosophy. This aided the party in achieving fairly national spread.

From all we have seen, political parties in the first republic Nigeria fanned the members of sectional interest and tacked ability to work out a sustainable political ideology needed to nurture democratic ethos. They were formed along ethnic lines and well-established sectional interests as in the case of the Lagos Youth Movement.

Parties in the Second Republic (1979-1983)

As desirous as democratic governance and consolidation of same is to Nigeria she lost it with the demise of the first republic in 1966. This was partly due to the inability of the existing political parties at the time to evolve an enduring ideological foundation upon which to water their very existence. This brought the second republic in 1979 which spanned through 1983. One thing was remarkable with party politics of the second republic. This was the decision of the government to regulate and formulate the operation of political parties. According to Nwajoku (1983), the reason as to check the interference of ethnicity into politics at the expense of national unity. It was thought wise that forming political parties on the basis of ethnic patronage would work at cross purposes with the general interest of the country’s democratic experiment and the consolidation of same. Government embarked on the control of political parties in the second republic to ensure national unity. This she did by giving out guidelines by which political parties were expected to operate. Chief among the requirements for political parties to operate was the basic minimum requirement that political parties must be national in outlook both in membership and organization as well as be in line with the economic, political and social objectives of the state and not that which promotes sectional interest. Some major players in the second republic include the following political parties: Unity Party of Nigeria, Nigerian People’s Party, the Peoples Redemption Party and National Party of Nigeria will be discussed. Activities of these political parties as we will soon consider shaped the political system and democratic process of the second republic in Nigeria.

Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN)

This party formed in 1978 prior to the general election of 1979, was headed by late Chief Obafemi Awolowo as its founder. The party had many referred to as a clear cut ideological basis as it appeared to favour socialism as a core principle. With this, the party aimed at lofty programmes for Nigerian such as free education, free medical treatment and integrated rural agriculture. This happened to be a marked difference from what used to be the norm where political parties especially in the first republic, were bereft of a clear cut ideology. The ideological foundation till today remains a novelty in Nigerian political history especially in the history of party politics in Nigeria. With socialism as an ideology was geared not only towards winning a majority of the peoples’ vote but also to arouse political consciousness among the people. This by implication was aimed at democratic consolidation in the country.
However, it must be observed that the UPN was more dominant in the west as it was an offshoot of the AG of the first republic; a situation that cannot help democratic consolidation.

Third Republic

The search for a stable polity where political parties can lay a pivotal role to consolidate democracy never ended with the second republic. It continued with the third republic which began in 1985. One remarkable thing about this republic was the determination of the government to regulate political affairs and parties in the country. The road to civil rule programme of the third republic began when Gen. IBB inaugurated the political bureau via the Armed Forces Ruling Council in 1986. The bureau reported and this report formed the basis on which the transition to civil rule was based. With a careful review of the political system in the country with close attention paid to the party structures, the political bureau recommended the adoption of a two party system for the nation. The government of the day accepted this recommendation.

Though the government allowed politicians to form their own parties which allowed thirteen political associations to apply for registration, only two got the government’s nod. Based on the verification exercise carried by the National Electoral Commission, the Armed Forces Ruling Council approved the registration of two political parties for the country. These were the Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention. The manifestoes for both parties ironically happened to be the same except for some very minute differences thus making mockery of the whole essence of manifesto formulation. Though both parties had ideological differentials, both were tied to the apron-strings of governmental control. According to Ogunsonwo and Adamu (1982), the democratic and republican posture of both parties portrayed the political postures and organizational structure of the USA, a country Nigeria adopted her presidential system that the third republic assumed in the Nigerian political landscape.

The two party arrangements conducted the presidential elections of 1993 which had late M.K.O. Abiola of the SDP and Alhaji Tofa of the NRC featuring as presidential candidates. The resultant outcome almost tore the nation apart as the ejection was cancelled by the same IBB government that midwifed the transition process in the first place. The third republic had government controlled political party with distinct ideologies foisted on them. The inability of both parties to chart a new political course for the country almost tore up the country as the June 12 debacle indicated.

The Abacha Days

With the June 12 dust barely settled, late Gen. Sanni Abacha took over the reins of power forcefully from the Shonekan. Blinded by his ambition to transform himself into a civilian president, Abacha formed five political parties. These were the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), the National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), the Congress for National Consensus (CNC), the Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN) and
the Grassroot Democratic Movement (GDM). All these parties were seen as a decoy by the late maximum ruler to transmute himself into life presidency. As death snatched him away in June 1998, the five political parties once described as five fingers of a leprous hand (Matthew, 2007), got disbanded when Gen Abubakar took over.

Fourth Republic

When Abacha died n 1998, General Abdulsalam Abubakar succeeded him. Based on palpable tension in the land, he embarked on a transition programme to return the country to civil rule. The three political parties he formed included the Alliance for Democracy, the All Peoples Party and the Peoples Democratic Party. These parties contested the 1999 general elections that produced Olusegun Obasanjo administration. The Obasanjo administration via the instrumentality of INJEC, later registered other political parties such that we now have over 50 political parties.

Like what obtained in the previous republics, the political parties in the fourth republic lacked ideological basis. They were regrettably exposed to be hijacked by money bags. The nature of gangsterism adopted by the ruling PDP made mockery of the very essence of decent politics. It becomes absurd that some political parties though claimed to be national in outlook, never even had their presence beyond six local government areas out of the 774 we have in the country.

The place of democratic consolidation remains painfully unattained as the country struggles for a neat political ideology. The place of viable opposition until 2004/5 when Action Congress was formed was obviously absent. The state operates like one party state because of the domineering posture of the PDP. Seen as a party of “do or die” politics, the PDP is seen as doing very little in consolidating democratic ideas in the country. The dominance of PDP still exists today.

Ensuring Democratic Stability in Nigeria: Some Suggestion

The task of ensuring a stable democratic system in Nigeria has been a daunting one. From the first republic where all parties were fashioned along ethnic lines without clear cut ideological basis to the second republic with the exception of UPN that tilted towards socialism as an ideology. This trend threatened democracy san indicator of good government in Nigeria. Nigerian political life has been mixed crisis The regional based parties of the first and second republics, lacked ideological basis to consolidate democracy, the excessive governmental control of the third republic and the “do or die” politics of the fourth republic, all oiled the political decay of the Nigerian political system.

Political parties like we have observed, are key players in consolidation of democratic ideas. This is lacking in Nigeria. This craves much to be desired especially the need to restructure Nigerian political system to instill some element of sanity into the system and leave it pre-pointed for the task of democratic consolidation. A situation such as we have it today where political parties such as the PDP lacked any iota of
credibility as the first republic political parties we only paint a picture that the political landscape needs an overhaul. This is when we can say we have started laying the appropriate foundation to build an enduring democratic institution for the nation.

In the light of the above, it is of utmost importance that the following suggestions be made on Nigeria’s quest to consolidate her democracy.
(a) Political parties should be formed based on clear cut ideology to drive it as a conscious group organized along the political line and quest of capturing political powers so as to control government.
(b) Sectionalism and regional based groups must be discouraged from seeking registration as a political party. The turn of events in the first republic never oiled the political development of the country.
(c) A political party regulatory mechanism should be instituted to check activities of political parties to conform with laid down principles.

Conclusion
Political parties are fundamental and critical to the attainment of democratic desires and aspiration. They are perhaps the most crucial singular organ for the mobilization of the people for democratic purposes. Yet, they could be the vehicle for the destruction of democratic desires and aspiration. It is in this light that this paper has been taking a critical look at the nexus between political parties and democratic consolidation with special reference to Nigeria. The paper concludes that political parties of the first and second republics could not contribute to democratic consolidation because they were tribal/regional parties and equally they lacked ideological focus. For the aborted third republic control of those parties (SDP and NRC) made it impossible for them to contribute to democratic consolidation. For our current fourth republic the dominant role of the ruling PDP and the dwarfing of other political parties cripples democratic consolidation. The paper thus recommends an overhaul of our party system in order to have strong and credible opposition.

Reference


