

## PARTY POLITICS AND THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Political parties perform a number of functions in a political entity. Chief among these functions is that of representation. In modern liberal democratic theory the electorate votes for people to represent them. Most times the platform for election is provided by political parties. Nigeria started experimenting with representative democracy in 1922. The extent of representation was so little, only four Nigerians were elected and they covered only Lagos and Calabar. With the advent of more political parties it was expected that this pattern would change. Unfortunately, even though we now have more political parties, this has not translated to representation. A number of factors have contributed to this lack of political representation in the country. These include but are not restricted to electoral fraud, the activities of godfathers, the partisan role of the electoral management body and the security agencies among other sundry reasons. This paper makes the case that in Nigeria and especially since 1999 party politics has not brought about political representation. It argues that as the number of political parties has increased in the country, there has been a paradoxical decrease in the extent and scope of representation in the country. The political parties that exist are not people centered, since the people are often manipulated out of the representational process.*

**Keywords:** Defection, Democracy, Election, Electoral fraud, Godfatherism, Zoning

### Introduction

When party politics was introduced in Nigeria in 1922 via the Clifford Constitution, its major impediment was the restriction on political participation and representation. The political parties were limited in terms of number, only two of them: the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) and the Lagos Youth Movement (LYM that emerged in 1934), and in terms of spread of their activities. Their activities were limited to the coastal towns especially Lagos for the LYM and Lagos and Calabar for the NNDP. This is coupled with the fact that only four people were elected in the election (Omodia 2010). Nigeria has come a long way since 1922 in terms of the number and spread of political parties. The number of political parties and their spread seems to give the impression that representation has become an important requirement for the existence of political parties. For example, one of the requirements stipulated for the registration of political parties in the political transition to the Nigerian Fourth Republic was that aspiring political associations needed to garner at least ten percent of the votes in twenty four out of the thirty six states to qualify for permanent registration (Aina 2002).

This requirement seems to suggest that political parties were expected to really show capacity to represent the people. However, in the preparation for the 1999 elections, this requirement had to be watered down to avoid the emergence of a two party system. This is why the Alliance for Democracy was registered as the third party in 1999 (Aina 2002). Since that time there has been an exponential growth in the number of political parties and this has given the impression that the grounds of representation have increased. The number of political parties has grown from three in 1999 to thirty in 2002, fifty in 2007 and about fifty seven today. However, instead of this meaning more representation, it has not. As the number of parties increased their relevance in terms of being channels of representation has diminished (Egwemi 2009a). In fact the existence of political parties seems to have major threat to political representation in Nigeria today.

This paper examines the activities of political parties in Nigeria's fourth republic with the focus of unfolding the nexus between political parties and political representation in the Nigerian State. It argues that the existence of political parties has not meant political representation in Nigeria. The paper identifies and discusses the factors that have affected representation in Nigeria. Before going into the discussion however, a clarification of the key concepts of Democracy, Elections, Political Parties and representation is attempted in the next section.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

#### **Democracy**

Democracy is essentially a system of government in which the people control decision making. It is a system of government that ensures that power actually belongs to the people (Omotola 2006). According to Schumpeter democracy entails "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions, which realizes the common good by making the people decide issues through the election of individuals, who are to assembly in order to carry out its will" (in Omotola 2006:27). It is an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the peoples vote" (Omotola 2006:27). Democracy therefore from the perspective of this paper is viewed as a governmental process which encompasses the competitiveness for power in order to control political decisions in an atmosphere where civil liberties are exercised.

#### **Political Parties**

Political parties may be defined by their common aim. They seek political power either singly or in cooperation with other political parties. In this wise, Schumpeter has opined; the first and foremost aim of each political party is to prevail over the others in order to get into power or to stay in it" (Schumpeter 1961: 279). The distinguishing factor from other groups in a political system is this goal of attaining and/or maintaining political power.

Adigun Agbaje has identified three characteristics that distinguish political parties from other seemingly similarly constituted organizations. These are;

- It is a label in the minds of its members and the wider public especially the electorate.
- It is an organization that recruits and campaigns for candidates seeking election and selection into public political office.
- It is a set of leaders who try to organize and control the legislative and executive branches of government (Agbaje 1999:195).

The conception of this paper therefore is that political parties are the political structures and organizations through which people seek political offices especially in a democratic setting.

#### **Election/Representation**

Election as we have hinted is a major aspect of democracy. Elections, broadly conceived, refer to the process of elite selection by the mass of the population in any given political system. Although controversy rages among political thinkers about the nature of representation, there is one point of universal agreement; the representation process is intrinsically linked to elections and voting. Political representation is implicit in the very idea of constitutional government and elections are essential to the functioning of a truly representative government. Representatives, acting on behalf of the electorate make the legislative and executive decisions that voter in the aggregate could not possibly make for themselves, considering the sheer numbers of people involved (Anifowose 2003). The link between elections and democracy should be clear from the above "for thus far, no superior method has been evolved for selecting the leadership of a democratically ruled society". (Ojo 2007:6). As important as elections are in a democracy, it is important to note that they do not always lead to representation. This is to the extent that the incidence of fraud may characterize certain elections such that even when the people come out to vote, their votes do not count. Election rigging and other fraudulent electoral practices frustrate the democratic aspirations of citizens who have voted or would have voted into office someone else other than the eventual *winner*.

#### **The Nexus between Political Parties and Representation**

Democracy is about participation and representation. Participation is the extent to which individual members of society take part or get involved in the activities in their societies. Representation on the other hand, refers to the process by which people get chosen to act in the interest of the community or sectors thereof.

In modern day where the dominant form of democracy is indirect or representative democracy, political parties are the principal mechanism for ensuring citizen participation and representation in public policy (Agbaje 2005), and in fact through which individuals share the democratic values. Thus, a political party is an organized group of individuals who share similar political beliefs, opinions, principles, aspirations and interest with the sole aim of capturing political power and exercising it through the formation of government. In democracies, a political party is “a more or less permanent institution with the goal of aggregating interests, presenting candidates for elections with the purpose of controlling governments and representing such interests in government. It is thus a major vehicle for enhancing participation in governance” (Olarinmoye 2008:67). Political parties therefore, are saddled with the responsibility of recruiting competent individuals for political leadership through periodic elections, educating the electorate through political rallies and dissemination of information about government policies as well as serving as a vehicle for the articulation and aggregation of the interests of people. Thus, they serve as the pivot upon which the entire political process revolves.

In other words, there can be no meaningful democracy without a properly functioning political party system. It is obvious therefore, that political parties constitute the heart of democracy. The more vigorous and healthy they are the better assured is the health of the democratic process (Agbaje 1998). It is therefore difficult to imagine any modern democracy without political parties as they are the connecting links between diverse groups of peoples and governments. (Olarinmoye 2008). In this paper, we argue that as important as political parties are to democracy in theory the activities of political parties in Nigeria especially the antics of the dominant Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) has not made for effective political representation in the country. In the discussion that follows this paper examines four variables which have in tandem with the activities of political parties led to a representation deficit especially in Nigeria’s fourth republic. These factors have been used by the dominant PDP to deprive the majority of Nigerians representation.

### **Obstacles to Political Representation in Nigeria**

#### ***Electoral Fraud***

Electoral fraud has been one of the major impediments to political representation in Nigeria. In fact elections have continually recoded representation deficit since they commenced in 1999. Under the present dispensation, the incidence of electoral fraud has taken centre stage in the country since 1999. This has led to a major legitimacy crisis which the country is still grappling with (Egwemi 2008; Omodia 2009). The incidence of electoral fraud in the Nigerian democratic process has been deepened by the unwillingness of the political parties to play by the rules of the game. This is more so on the part of the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) which has elevated impunity to an art. The PDP has operated as if rules do not matter. In alliance with security agencies and the electoral management body, the PDP seems to have made up its mind not to make the peoples vote count (Ibrahim and Egwu 2005; 2005b; TMG 2007; NUD 2007).

Electoral fraud seemed to have become an article of faith for the PDP preparatory for the 2007 general elections when former President Olusegun Obasanjo decaled “... *this election is a do-or-die affair for the PDP. We have a reform program which we have started; we want those who we will hand over to, to continue the reforms*” (Vanguard 2007:15). As argued elsewhere, the import of the statement was that the PDP was going to use means whether fair or foul to achieve victory (Egwemi 2007a). The outcome of the elections left no one in doubt about the PDP’s determination. With the opprobrium that greeted the outcome of the elections, the PDP had no choice than to go for the Government of National Unity (GNU) since Late President Umar Musa Yar’Adua himself admitted the fraud that characterized his own emergence (Egwemi 2007a; 2008). The import of the discussion above is that party politics has not engendered political representation in the country. The fraud perpetrated by the PDP and the willingness of some political parties and their leaders to partake in the spoils of office meant that what the people wanted via the electoral process did not matter. This no doubt has negatively impacted on representation in Nigeria.

#### ***The Politics of Zoning***

One other factor that has been responsible for the lack of political representation in Nigeria’s fourth republic has been the zoning and/or rotation of offices along the lines of the six geo-political zones of the country. In a country as diverse as Nigeria, zoning may not be a wholly bad practice as it helps to give every zone a sense of belonging. As a corollary, the feeling of *being a part* of the country gives rise to some level of socio-political stability.

However, it could also be argued that zoning by geo-political configuration and by any other criteria for that matter is a discriminatory thing. It also robs the people of representation as a preferred candidate may be done away with to satisfy the zoning formula. In Nigeria's fourth republic, the ruling PDP seems to have agreed on a zoning formula for its major elective and appointive offices. At the national level the zoning is on the basis of North and South generally and on the basis of the six geo-political zones in particular. In the eight years between 1999 and 2007 Olusegun Obasanjo occupied the presidency. In 2007 power shifted to the North and Umar Musa Yar'Adua was elected. However, with his death on 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2010, the crises associated with zoning emerged. While some insisted that power had to remain in the North, others thought that Goodluck Jonathan who took over upon the death of Yar'Adua was eligible to contest. The politics of zoning in the post Yar'Adua era became so intense that it now constitutes a veritable threat to the country democratic project in general and the issue of representation in particular. The gladiators on both sides of the zoning divide, pro and against went the whole hog and in all of this the interest of Nigerian voters was relegated to the back seat (Akintunde 2010; Shobayo 2010; Musa 2010; Okpara 2010; Yakassai 2010; Anas 2010; Olaosebikan 2010; Oguntola 2010).

### **Godfatherism**

The phenomenon of godfatherism has been one of the factors that have impeded political representation in Nigeria. The scope of this phenomenon is quite wide in Nigeria. Godfather politics has manifested in Kwara, Borno, Oyo and Anambra states and even at the federal level. In the states, godfathers have installed their godsons and have literally held these states hostage.

The import of these godfathers installing their godsons is that those the people want to represent them may not have a chance even in electoral contests. A few of the posturing of these godfathers will bear this position out. For example, the self acclaimed godfather of Anambra politics once postured "I am the greatest godfather in Nigeria because this is the first time an individual single handedly put in position every politician in the state (Olarinmoye 2008). And the late strong man of Ibadan politics once gleefully postured;

*Predominantly, I dominate the political affairs of this state. All the governors that have won never did so without my contribution and influence ... it is a known fact and it has always been so before now that if you pass through me, you would get anything you want in politics. So if I say I dominate politics, I do (Adedibu 2007:26).*

As argued elsewhere in any polity where godfathers hold sway, the first casualty is free choice (Egwemi 2007b; 2009a). This is to the extent that the people are not in a position to determine those who represent them since this is at the whims of the godfather. For the avoidance of any doubt, the godfather has a lot of resources which he can use to impose his will on the people. These include according to Ayoade, political connections, security, anti-social behavior and money or access to money (Ayoade 2006). As we have argued elsewhere these resources give the godfather the feeling that he is above law and so he becomes daring and unrestrained (Egwemi ; Omodia 2007). The attitude of godfathers seems to have been encouraged by the ruling PDP.

For example in Oyo State, the former PDP chairman Ahmadu Ali thought that Ibadan was a garrison and that the then Governor Rashid Ladoja had no choice but to take orders from Adedibu who was the commander of the garrison (The News, 2007). Also the former President Olusegun Obasanjo pleaded with the people of Oyo State to tolerate Adedibu's excesses since the man was dry fish that could not be bent anymore (Daily Trust, 2006). In other words, in spite of Adedibu's well known disdain for the law and due process, Obasanjo thought Adedibu had to be tolerated instead of called to order (Egwemi 2009b). This kind of encouraging attitude of PDP leaders has made the godfathers very daring and this has led to a major political representation deficit for Nigerians.

### **Defections**

The last major factor that has been an impediment to political representation has been the phenomenon of defections in the last decade in Nigeria. Defection involves the movement of a member of party A into party B. Different reasons are given for politicians defecting. Whatever the reasons, the fact is that defection from one political party is not a political crime. Even in the advanced polities, defections are not uncommon. However, the difference is that:

*Unlike in the United States of America (USA) and Britain where it is very difficult for party members to defect, it is the order of the day here (that is, in Nigeria). The lack of ideological commitment and penchant for opportunism have been a feature common among our politicians (Ereton 2009:61)*

While it is important to accentuate that the state is very important in Africa; in the specific case of Nigeria, “the state has increasingly become a magnet for all facets of political and economic life...” (Joseph 1991:1). This explains the intensity and persistence in the struggle for the control and exploitation of the offices of the state. In a democratic setting, this struggle for the offices of the state is carried out by political parties and their candidates during elections. It is needless to add that the political party which wins and controls the offices of the state is in a better position than that which losses. That is why Alan Cowell argues that:

*A man who supports the party in office will be rewarded with contracts for official projects, enabling him to pass on a large size to those further down the line that looks to him for generosity. The system helps those in power to perpetuate their rule because they are at the fountainhead of wealth (in Joseph 1991:1).*

This is the sense in which we examine defections in Nigeria between 1999 and 2009. It seems to be the case that not wanting to be on the fringes of the Nigerian political landscape, translates to breaking ranks with ones party and joining forces with the People Democratic Party (Egwemi 2007a). The PDP as argued elsewhere has successfully foisted an “if-you-can’t-beat-them-join-them mentality” on Nigerian politicians (Egwemi 2007a).

This mentality is made worse by the zero sum nature of politics in Nigeria. In such a situation, members of the opposition are at the receiving end of a lot of injustices. This dilemma of the opposition is captured well by Kawu when he argues that: “in a winner-takes-all setting, Nigeria’s opposition is an island of frustration and anger, and being left out can lead to desperacy...” (Kawu 1999:56). Whatever the reasons for defections are, the truth is that defections have led to a lack of political representation in Nigeria. The truth is that when a governor defects to another party (like the Governors of Kebbi, Zamfara and Bauchi) he robs the people who voted him in the first place of representation. An ANPP governor who defects to PDP robs his ANPP voters of their votes since they lose the platform upon which they voted him. In order to check what we categorize here as the menace of defections, it is suggested that those who wish to defect need to resign from their elective positions before doing so. This would go a long way to check the opportunism of defectors. The electoral reform process needs to tackle the menace of defections once and for all.

### **Conclusion**

Political parties in Nigeria over the years and especially since 1999 have failed to perform one of their key functions namely representation. Political parties have flourished literally speaking since 1999 but this has not been translated to effective representation. A number of reasons have been responsible for the increasing number of political parties and the paradoxical lack of representation. Suffice to say as this paper has shown that the key reason for lack of political representation is electoral fraud. The extent of fraud that has trailed elections in Nigeria since 1999 has led to the crisis of representation.

For the existence of political parties to translate to representation, the electoral process as it is at present needs to be overhauled. First, the electoral management body really needs to be made independent. Secondly, electoral fraudsters need to be punished through effective institutionalization and implementation of enabling laws. Until these issues are adequately tackled, the quest for political representation will remain a mirage.

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