

TWO-PARTY SYSTEM IN NIGERIA - AN EVALUATION

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Introduction

The significance of party politics as an instrument of political change has become more recognised in most parts of the world, including Africa today. Its importance in the democratic process however, is as old as the modern state. In fact, in nearly all modern societies, democracy is practiced through political parties. Although the importance and potentiality of party politics as an effective instrument of democratic development cannot be over-emphasised, the realisation of democratic recruitment of leaders would depend largely on the type, formation and structure of political parties in a country.

Nigeria is a country where an age-long desire to building a stable and democratic political system has remained elusive. This has been largely due to the inability of the political process to install the right kind of leadership usually supplied by the political parties. Nigeria adopted a multi-party system in the First and Second Republics in 1960-1966 and 1979-1983. However, the Military government headed by General Babangida which came to power in 1985 decided in 1988 to hand over power to a civilian government. It subsequently initiated a long time-table of events to manage the transition.

One fundamental decision made by military government was the introduction of a two-party system in Nigeria. This was done through the establishment and funding of two Political Parties by the government in 1989. Most Nigerians were anxious to see if the new two-party system would be capable of building a formidable foundation for further democratization of the Nigerian society in the 1990s and beyond.

The objective of this paper therefore is to examine the establishment and operations of the two-party system and its capability or otherwise for ensuring a stable democracy in Nigeria. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section examines the meaning, functions and significance of Political Parties. The second traces the origin of political parties in Nigeria while the third section evaluates the two-party system in Nigeria. The conclusion follows.

I Political Party: Meaning, Functions and Significance:

A Political Party has been defined as an organised group of persons who share similar political views and who act deliberately in concert to gain control of the decision-making machinery of government that creates public policy¹. A political party may also be defined as a group of citizens within a nation State who are united in their general agreement about certain basic ideas concerning how that society should function. This group organises itself in order that it may present candidates for public office under its platform, which consists of a statement of the basic ideas of agreement².

In other words, a political party seeks to gain control of government by using the political process of a country. Party Systems are of different types. The traditional method of categorising party systems is according to the number of parties a system contains. For the sake of simplicity, therefore, we shall classify party systems as: one party; two-party and multi-party systems. The One Party System refers to a situation where only one party legally exists and controls the affairs of the state. The two-party system presupposes the existence of only two dominant political parties competing to elect candidates into political office and to make public policy. On the other hand, the multi-party system refers to the existence of many parties, representing different interest, in struggle with one another for power.

From the definitions of a political party examined above, it is clear that a political party is a very important and effective instrument of democratic development. To further appreciate the significance of a political party in democratic development, the important functions performed by them in the political process should be examined. One function is that, it is usually through political parties that: (1) The selection and sponsoring of candidates for elections are done. (2) Political parties also perform the important function of interest articulation and interest aggregation. By so doing, they would crystalize and provide a channel for the effective expression of public opinion. They thus encourage people's direct and indirect participation in government. (3) A good party system is capable of making the government more prudent and efficient, especially where there is a rival party. (4) Similarly, a good party system remains the most efficient means of political education and political socialisation. This is because political parties usually generate political consciousness in people about the affairs of their country. They make people more enlightened and more interested in political matters through campaigns, rallies, meetings, etc.

Another important function of political parties is that they are capable of unifying diverse people in a heterogeneous society. This is done through the aggregation and articulation of interests across socio-cultural boundaries thereby ensuring greater national cohesion and unity. Another important function performed by political parties which make them relevant to any political system is the function of organising government. When a political party gains control of government, it has the responsibility of planning and executing public policy, not only in the interest of its members but in the interest of the country. Similarly, political parties give government business coherence and consistency. This is because if a good political party forms the government, government policies and deliberations are likely to be stable and consistent. This tends to give continuity stability of a nation.

Although some of these functions may be performed by other groups in society, it is clear that these other groups are not as organised as political parties, hence are incapable of performing these crucial functions as effectively and on a nation-wide scale as the political parties tend to do. This is why party politics has been widely accepted as an essential ingredient of representative democracy. Parties are therefore, features of most modern democracies.³

II The Origin of Political Parties.

Political parties started as factions or cliques which performed political activities in 17th century Europe, particularly in Britain. The early factions were the British Whig and Tory groups. Actually, these two groups were not political parties at all. They were, in the words of George Washing, "Political Factions"⁴. However, popular scholars of politics such as Lapalombara and Weiner explained that modern political parties arose in 1800 in the United States of America as a result of the rise of parliaments and with the gradual extension of suffrage when the need to woo masses became strongly felt. Modern parties also originated in Great Britain after the reform of 1832 while their origins were associated with the revolutionary year of 1848 in France⁵.

The earliest groups identifiable in West Africa were the Aborigine's Right Protection Society in 1897 and the National Congress of British West Africa in 1920.

In Nigeria, political parties began in 1923 as a result of the introduction of elective principles enshrined in the 1922 Clifford constitution.⁶ The origin of political parties in Nigeria can therefore be traced to the defects inherent in the Clifford constitution under which most citizens of Nigeria were disqualified

from voting. This led to the formation of the Nigerian National Democratic Party in 1923 and the Nigerian Youth Movement in 1938. These could not be classified as political parties but as "Proto-Parties" according to Thomas Hodgkin. Their influence barely extended beyond the immediate environs of Ibadan and Lagos.⁷

Perhaps, the first real political party in Nigeria was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in 1944. There were other political parties such as the Action Group, (AG) the Northern People's Congress, (NPC) the Northern Elements Progressive Union and many others. However, there were only three main parties - the NCNC, the AG and the NPC. The others were highly localised parties based on specific interest.

The First Republic (1960 - 1966)

The three main parties contested the first national elections in Nigeria with the NPC forming the government after several political discord, civil disturbances and alliances of parties. The first republic, being the first time Nigerians had the opportunity of governing themselves after independence was full of prospects and promises. However, it soon faced accumulated problems of corruption, patronage, disunity, sectionalism, and many others.⁸ The first republic which started in 1960 came to an end in 1966 when a Military government took over power "to correct the drift and build a better, united Nigeria." From 1966 to 1979, when one Military regime or the other ruled the country, there were no official political parties. In fact, Military regimes are inherently opposed to the existence of political parties as they do not have to rely on them for the purpose of governing.

The Second Republic (1979 - 1983)

However, when the Military decided to disengage in 1979, a vacuum was going to be created. This vacuum was to be filled by political parties because as earlier defined, they constitute the basic institutions for the translation of mass preferences into public policy. The question of what form of party system to adopt however came up. Finding a solution to this national problem therefore became one of the assignments of the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) set up by the then Military government. The government expressed its fear over "the harmful effect of a proliferation of national parties". The government's fear was so enormous that it proposed to the CDC to possibly evolve some means by which a government could be formed without the involvement of parties.

The findings of the CDC later revealed that out of about 350 memoranda submitted to it, of the 28 that made specific references to parties and party system, five proposed a "no-party" state for Nigeria; one memorandum advocated a single-party system, with two or more parties⁹. What could be regarded as a "restricted" Multi-Party system was adopted by government. This was because certain conditions were laid down for would-be political parties to fulfil by the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) which had been assigned to do so.

By the time the ban placed on partisan politics since 1967 was lifted in 1978, about 150 political associations had been formed. However, the FEDECO recognised and approved only 5 political associations for registration as political parties on the basis of their national spread. These were those with offices in at least 13 out of the then 19 states of the country. These were the National Party of Nigeria, the Unity Party of Nigeria, the Nigerian Peoples Party, the Great Nigeria People's Party and the People's Redemption Party. These were parties that contested the 1979 elections. The new parties, unlike those of the first republic, were expected to be truly national organisations which must reflect the "national character" of Nigeria. The decision effectively excluded the left and younger-generation political parties and ensured that the first president of the "new" Nigeria would be chosen among five leading politicians of the first republic¹⁰.

The Road to the Third Republic.

Having come into power in 1985, the new military government decided in 1989 to draw up a programme of transition to democratic civilian rule to begin in 1986/87 and scheduled to terminate with the inauguration of the Third Republic in 1992. However, the most disturbing problem was how to design a party system that would best guarantee a stable democratic order for Nigeria. The government subsequently set up the Political Bureau to, among other things, recommend a viable party system for the country. According to the Bureau, it recommended a two-party system for the country because there should be a break from the past and that it would best guarantee a stable democratic order for the country at this time having earlier tried a multi-party system. The Bureau said it believed that the two-party structure would succeed only on the condition that both political parties accept the national philosophy of government and that the differences between the two of them are on priorities and strategies¹¹. This was accepted by the government with the hope and belief that Nigerians would embark upon the process of forming political associations on the basis of philosophy, policies, issues and programmes. The government

therefore directed the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) under a new name of the National Electoral Commission (NEC), to screen political associations out of which the two most viable would be recognised and registered as political parties. There were more than 30 political associations out of which NEC eventually recommended 6 political associations to the government for consideration. The government did not register any of these associations as political parties.

Some of the reasons given for the rejection of all the political associations were their failure to pay attention to organisational structures at the grassroots level, factionalism, rigging and falsification of claims, disregard of the guidelines for registration, poor organisation, antecedents and the presence of "moneybags". It therefore concluded that a new Soci-Political order could not be created through the registration of any of these political associations.

Against this background, the government began a search for political parties "that enjoy internal consistency in philosophy and action" which it believed hold the key to the sustenance of democracy in any country including Nigeria. The government therefore opted for a two-party system and subsequently established a "grassroots democratic" two-party system. The government was convinced that "something revolutionary in our thinking" needs to be introduced. It expressed the view that the grassroots democratic two-party system, provides the kind of revolutionary departure we need for establishing a mass two-party system¹².

On 7th October, 1989, President Babangida addressed the nation to announce the formation of the two-parties by the government. The two political parties were named Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention. In addition to establishing these "grassroot political parties, the government decided to fund the two parties. According to the President, the decision to go into the business of party formation was because "we do not believe that the old political structures, which failed us in the past should form, or be allowed to form, the basis for our new electoral competition if we are serious about creating a new social order"¹³.

According to him, the belief of the Military government to establish the two government parties for the third Republic was to achieve the following objectives:

- (a) Provide a grassroots basis for the emergence of political parties;

- (b) establish a grassroots or mass platform for the emergence of new leadership;
- (c) give equal right and opportunities to all Nigerians to participate in the political process irrespective of their wealth, religion, geographical backgrounds and professional endeavours;
- (d) de-emphasize the role of money in politics;
- (e) reduce, to a minimum level, the element of violence in our electoral process;
- (f) preclude the emergence of political alliances along the same lines as in the first and second Republics and, therefore, give Nigerians a new political structure within which to operate;
- (g) ensure the emergence of a new, more dedicated and more genuine leadership cadre, which will not be a mere proxy for old political war-lords
- (h) chart a new pattern of political recruitment and participation which will enhance Nigerian's stability;
- (i) establish strong institutional structures which will not only sustain future governments, but also be strong enough to stand the test of time;
- (j) establish a political system that will be operated according to the spirit and letter of the Constitution of the Federal Republic¹⁴.

In addition to the above objectives, the government confirmed its resolve to continue to pursue the political transition programme and the Structural Adjustment Programme and always in the interest of the people.

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) was directed by government to supervise and monitor membership recruitment exercises of the political parties formed by the government. The constitutions of the parties were to be written according to the guidelines set out by government. Similarly, NEC was empowered to synthesize the manifestoes of the former political associations and submit to government for approval. NEC was also to work out the symbols of identity - flag, emblem and colour for the parties. NEC was also to monitor expenditure and render relevant reports to government; provide membership cards, symbols and educate the masses about the new parties.

III An Evaluation of the Two-Party System

Here, we shall identify and measure the major consequences and effects of the two government-owned political parties and see if the objectives of their formation have been realized.

Because the idea of direct popular government has been impracticable in modern society, the trend today is therefore to uphold the representative principle as the most ideal by which political parties are established through which the people elect some citizens in whom they have trust, to represent their interests when governing them. From independence in 1960 to date, however, Nigeria had only two chances of practicing democracy (1960-1966, and 1979-1983) while military rule has been the practice from 1967-1978, 1983 to date.

The political parties of the first Republic were severely limited in their capabilities to integrate the components of that diversity of society known as Nigeria¹⁵. Similarly, the party system of Nigeria's second Republic was bedeviled by a lack of time, in advance of the full onset of electoral competition, to develop fresh leaderships, new coherent identities, and broad constituencies. As a result, the new parties were weak and volatile, and politics were greatly destabilized by the chaos of their divisions, defections, expulsions, and permutation¹⁶. All these problems and fears influenced the demand for a policy capable of evolving a new party system for the Third Republic.

It is normally doubtful that a non-democratically elected government such as the military can lay claim to creating an enduring democracy. Various government officials, agencies and individuals have been involved in this important political process. The incompetence of the Military in administration has thus been widely demonstrated in this regard. What it did was to merely consider the options and take the final decision on the various vital aspects of the formation of political parties and the transition programme itself.

Beyond the formation of these parties, the government provided funds and created the administrative and programmatic infrastructure. These and other actions of government to make the political parties function according to her desire have not gone without criticism, particularly because these actions constitute what has been described as "extreme political engineering or the tendency for the state to over-control politics"¹⁷. Doubts have been expressed by concerned citizens to this effect. For instance, it has been observed that the approach betrays a lack of faith in the people by making it difficult for them to learn the democratic rules of trial and error, and by creating institutions not

properly anchored by people empowerment. The implication is that the two political parties are hardly more than "misconceived clones of Doddan Barracks offering basically the same ideological outlook - and therefore a defacto one party solution that is unlikely to excite mass participation in the following political process¹⁸.

As earlier noted, one of the objectives of the Babangida's government for creating two entirely new political parties in Nigeria was to have a break from the past. According to him, "we now have a clean slate and new political parties which can provide the turn around for all Nigerians, rich or poor, irrespective of their individual loyalties or geo-political locations." In this new grassroots mass party experiment, we are all equal "founders and joiners". However, we can say without hesitation, that these objectives have become clearly elusive. This is because the two political parties established and funded by government are in practice far away from being entirely new political organisations to the extent that the more powerful of the 13 political associations which were earlier rejected by government had succeeded in "hijacking" the two new parties. This had been widely demonstrated in the emergence and operation of the elements of old ties and old politicians who have graduated from the politics of the first and second Republics.

It should be noted that the structures, characters and even membership of some of these political associations reflected the past. For example, some of them can be linked to political parties of the first and second Republics.

Political thuggery, lack of ideological clarity, contradictory official statements, personality politics, flagrant display of wealth, unrealistic promises, etc were common features in those two periods. Similarly, when NEC was mandated to screen political associations for registration in preparation for the third republic, the same features surfaced again. What happened was that most of the political associations, in the absence of agreed new perspective had little chance but to fall back on old ties and same practices.

Furthermore, the government had as one of its objectives to prevent affluent Nigerians from "hijacking" these parties as part of removing the parties from the vices of the past.

Again, the governmental policy to create a new political order by establishing two government sponsored parties could not be said to have achieved its aim. As pointed out earlier, the old cleavages were reflected in the two government parties. For instance, it had been said that the government parties - NRC and

the SDP have actually been hijacked by the more powerful of the 13 associations which the government refused to register. Thus, activities in both the Nigerian National Congress (NNC) and the Republic Party of Nigeria (RPN) appear to have become dominant in the NRC while leaders of the People's Solidarity Party and the People's Front of Nigeria (PFN) have surfaced in the SDP¹⁹.

Another failure of the policy and its implementation has been manifested in the over involvement of the military in the banning and unbanning of politicians. One is tempted to agree with C.C. Onoh that the deliberate attempt to discredit a whole generation of the political class has resulted in the current in-built instability of the programme where rules are randomly made and changed at the whims and caprices of the military. Politics has been so bureaucratised that you begin to wonder what exactly the government has in mind with all these²⁰.

Indeed, this approach has always been the practice since the inception of this military government which had earned the President the nick name of the "Maradona" of Nigerian politics. It is necessary to also add that this approach has succeeded in creating doubts in the minds of most Nigerians as to the success and sincerity of the military in the transition programme.

Another failure on the part of government is its inability to eradicate the use of money in the political process which has become a permanent feature of the Nigerian political class. The reasons for this are two - one, having virtually disqualified in significant proportions of articulate and experienced Nigerians, the Military regime has left the field open to those who dominated the politics of the first and second republics; namely, the self-employed, half employed, the unemployed, middlemen and business touts²¹.

Second, the insulation of public servants from party politics has encouraged the rise of "illiterate, uncommitted and philistic" class of old political jobbers who play politics full-time and are ready to sacrifice anything for money²². These have succeeded in perpetrating the presence of money politics. Another important reason for the perpetration of money politics is the effect of the almost unbearable harshness of the structural Adjustment Programme which made Unemployed youths to join this class of politicians.

For these and other reasons, it became impossible for the two parties to successfully conduct the presidential primaries. This development seems to confirm our earlier contentions that the old cleavages with their attendant weaknesses and malpractices have remained unchanged inspite of the claims

or desire of government to build two parties on a clean slate. For instance, when the president was commenting on the investigations into the two futile Presidential primaries, he confirmed that virtually all the candidates with the backing and support of the fictionalised executive committees of the parties at all levels had wantonly contravened the provisions of decree 37 of 1992. The government's solution to this was the dissolution of the executive of the two parties and the appointment of a caretaker committee made up of bureaucratic types for the two parties. The neutrality of some of these caretaker members has been questioned and in fact some of them have been dropped.

By the assignment of these caretaker committees the government seemed to have gone back to square one. This is because according to the then National Electoral Commission (NEC) Chairman, their immediate assignment would be to bring back party structures and compile a new membership register because, as he put it, "whatever selection process is adopted, it is human beings who will be involved". Therefore, given the spate evidence of factionalism that has been witnessed in intra and inter-party interactions since 1989, it is safe to claim that the political results desired by the government have not yet been achieved.²³

Moreover, as a result of the failure of these two parties to conduct successful presidential primaries hence their dissolution and replacement with care-taker committees, whose members were hand-picked, most Nigerians were worried about the capability of the government to ensure a lasting democratic order for the country through her two political parties. Similarly, some Nigerians were confused and skeptical about the entire transition programme following that development. For instance, a politician saw the appointment of these sets of party officials as a national catastrophe because he believed that the appointment of political officials as party leaders devoid of consultations is obviously most cavalier. He concluded by saying that "there is no short-cut to party formation nor can anyone organise political parties by proxy".²⁴

Similarly, another politician express the opinion that if the parties had been formed by the civilians, the transition programme would not have run into the kind of dead end it seemed to have careered into. But under the circumstances of equal fonders, you now move serious leadership issues from the purview of the informed to the terrain of the uninformed.²⁵ Again, if one agrees with this contention, it is evident again that the aim of the government to establish political parties whose members would all be joiners without fonders has not been realised.

IV Concluding Remarks

What has been shown in this paper has been the analysis of the government policy of two-partyism in Nigeria. From our analysis, it has been shown that the policy objectives of the government have remained largely unrealised or completely elusive. The war against extremists, and the series of selective mass disqualifications that have attended the implementation of the transition programme seem to support the view that the Babangida's administration's exercise in institutional engineering by taking the unprecedented step of creating and funding the two-party failed to ensure a smooth transition to civil rule.

The over involvement of government in party formation in terms of bureaucratic politics and the enormous financial commitment into the two parties are not capable of providing the much-needed stable democracy. The introduction of these government parties had brought further complications to the age-long search for sustained democracy. This is because the government has subjected the transition programme to too many manipulations and the use of unconventional methods that the direction and the period of its completion became highly unpredictable. The sincerity of the military to leave office therefore became doubtful inspite of its repeated promise to do so. These fears were confirmed when the results of the Presidential election which was scheduled to be the last step to the third republic was unilaterally cancelled by the military at the time when it should be announced. The period of cancellation was so close to the scheduled end of the transition programme that an attempt to conduct another election failed, bringing the almost eight-year old transition programme to an abortive end. The cancelled Presidential election on June 12 1993 was widely acclaimed to be peaceful held free and fair. However, one of the major reasons given by the military for its cancellation was the use of too much money in the preparations for the election by the two presidential candidates.

The failure of the Babangida's military government to take Nigerians to the "promised land" has made the desire to put an end to military intervention in Nigeria remain a mirage as yet another military government led by General Sani Abacha emerged barely two months after the inception of an interim government headed by a civilian. The fruitless end of the transition programme resulted in a waste of money, time and resources. Moreover, it has thrown the country into serious political crises following intensive agitation for the actualisation of the cancelled Presidential Election results. This adversely affected the economic and social activities of the nation as some key sectors of the economy such as banks, petroleum industry, etc. went on strike for this

purpose. It is important to remember that the job of governing is carried on by means of public policies. And producing good policies requires not only clear objectives and specifically targeted programme but also readiness to anticipate the overall consequences of any policy package²⁶.

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