

Democratization “Without Political Parties”: The Nigerian Example

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Abstract

Political parties are globally recognized as agents of democratization. Against this background, this paper interrogates the centrality of political parties in Nigeria’s democratization process. Focusing on the country’s fourth republic that began in 1999, the roles of political parties in the transition from one government to another within the period under review were appraised. Through content analysis of data obtained from secondary sources and observation, the paper analyzed how political parties have distorted democratic consolidation in Nigeria. It is argued that given their nature, character and activities, the recognized and registered political platforms for contesting elections in the country could hardly be described as political parties in the real sense of the word. This is attributed to the challenges associated with the constitutional provisions for evolving political parties and antics of the ruling class in the country, thus, providing a premise for the emergence of these political associations and boost their activities. Furthermore, we analyzed attempts at addressing these challenges and why they appear to be intractable. In conclusion, the paper suggests that unless the relevant constitutional provisions are improved to promote the formation of political parties (in the real sense of the word), democratic consolidation may remain an illusion as the country experiences transition from one government to another.

Keywords: Democratization, political parties, election, Nigeria, fourth republic, ruling elite



Introduction

The advent of the state elicited different styles of government which have been employed at various periods to administer the affairs of the state, regulate its relationship with the citizens on the one hand and amongst the latter themselves on the other. The advancement of society makes a system of governance that appears to be fashionable today to become obsolete tomorrow. Prior to the advent of democracy, different types of autocratic regimes were in force in Europe between 1920s and 1930s (Lutz, 2017), across the globe in the 1930s and 1940s (Motadel, 2019) which extended till the 1960s in Latin America and Africa (Motadel, 2016).

The “independence of the United States of America and the French Revolution” (Muno, 2012) influenced the acceptance of democracy as an alternative style of government. The speed at which countries migrated from various shades of autocratic regimes to democratic rule has been described as wave by Huntington (1993). Thus, he categorized the time and period when countries in various regions of the world subscribed to democratic transition into the “first, second and third wave of democratization”.

Africa was amongst the regions caught in the web of the third wave. Sequel to decolonization and independence of African countries, autocratic regimes became common in the continent as over thirty-four countries were governed by the military junta which lasted till the late 1990s (Onwughalu, Obiorah, Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2019). However, with the popularity of democracy in the international order, the exertion of external pressure cum influence from the West, which range from imposition of sanctions, conditions for grants or aids, to electoral assistance, election monitoring and observation, the states in Africa started transiting to democratic rule and have recorded disparate degree of successes.

Two remarkable events shaped the present scenario. First is: the outright intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2017 to salvage the Gambia democratic transition (Hartmann, 2017) and second, the foiling of coup attempt against Ali Bongo of Gabon in January 2019 (Onwughalu, et al, 2019) affirm the rejection of autocratic regimes in the continent. In spite of these scenarios, the democratization experience of most African countries could be described as “motion without movement” (Institute for Peace and Security Studies, 2016). This could be attributed to the respective roles played by the actors in the democratization process of African states.

Nigeria was one of the countries that played prominent roles in restoring democracy in the Gambia (Hartmann, 2017). This paper therefore examines democratization in Nigeria since the beginning of the fourth republic from 1999. Given the centrality of political parties as one of the crucial actors in the transition from autocratic to democratic rule (Omodia,



2010; Adele 2001 cited in Okereka 2015), it interrogates their perceived non-existence in Nigeria and the factors that have sustained it. In doing this, data were sourced from Nigeria's 1999 constitution (as amended), the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended), the Guidelines for the Registration of Political Parties dated 15 May 2002, other relevant publications and participants' observation to analyze the role of political parties in the country's democratization process. The study was qualitative in nature. In analyzing data, the nature, character and activities of political parties, how they impact transition from one government to another, and the challenges of evolving political parties in the country were examined. We triangulated the Structural-Functional approach and the Elite theory to provide insight to understanding these phenomena. The paper is organized into nine sections. The introduction that serves as a background was followed by the contextualization of Nigerian scenario, which places the paper in perspective. The theoretical underpinning adopted for the study constitutes section three. Section four focuses on the 1999 constitution and the emergence of recognized and registered political platforms for contesting elections in Nigeria that posture as political parties. This brings to the fore our analysis on political parties and their functions in a democracy, vis-à-vis the identity question of "political parties" in Nigeria in sections five and six respectively. Previous attempts at forming political parties in the country and obstacles facing the evolution of political parties in Nigeria were examined in section seven and eight. Section nine is the conclusion.

Contextualizing the Discourse

There are different expositions on the conception of democratization. However, this paper shares the views of Naokatsu (n.d), Muno (2012), Lindberg et al (2018) and Kauffman (2018) which identify its characteristics as a process, that is continuous, leading to changes in institutions that is geared towards transforming a regime which may not necessarily result in the attainment of a democracy. The discourses on democratization elicit the concepts of "transitology" and "consolidology" (Naokatsu, n.d). While the former emphasizes the strategic political actors and events involved in democratization and how they interact in the process, the latter dwells on the trajectories of consolidating democracy.

In this paper, the analysis focused more on transitology than consolidology given Nigeria's democratic experience. According to Schmitter (2014) transition is characterized mainly by three primary factors, the presence of "uncertainty," "agency" and "rules." The first is attributed to the unpredictability of political events in the process, and the second to the actors who make decisions during regime transition. Amongst these actors he identifies "a party, a cabal, a junta" as being very important (Schmitter, 2014:3). The first underscores the title and concern of this paper. The third is the legal frameworks that regulate or



moderate the milieu where the other two factors operate. In other words, it is the existence of rules and how they are reviewed subsequently (by the actors based on outcome of events) that guide the actors and events respectively during transition. In the final analysis, the interactions of these three factors result in outcomes that influence the emergence of democracy as a style of government and how well it performs. In this vein, democratization could be regarded as a political transition towards liberal democracy, which aims at democratic consolidation characterized by the drive for increased citizens' participation, constitutionalism, and rule of law, free and fair elections. Importantly, it "does not occur in a linear process; rather, it is a long, slow, and conflicting process, often with frequent reversals" (Kauffman, 2018).

Schmitter (2014) identifies four possible outcomes of transition. Given Nigeria's experience from military to civilian, and from civilian to civilian transition respectively, it appears to be caught in a borderline between the second outcome that is "... a hybrid regime which does not satisfy the minimal procedural criteria for political democracy, but which does not regress to the status quo ante," and the third outcome that is "a polity ..., in a sense, condemned to democracy without enjoying the consequences and advantages that it offers. Whatever formal rules are enunciated in the constitution or basic statutes are treated as contingent arrangements to be bent or dismissed when the opportunity presents itself" (Schmitter, 2014:73-74). These aptly describe the Nigeria's case, which is largely a function of the actions and inactions of an "agency," in this case the "political parties," which have failed to improve and strengthen itself, as well as the rules governing transition from time to time based on outcomes of events in the process. In other words, members of the legislature and the head of the executive arm elected on the platforms of "political parties" in the country deliberately treat the rules regulating transition process in a manner that advances their personal interest or that of the ruling class at the expense of the transition. Some examples of this are the amendment of the Electoral Act 2002 that striped the electoral commission of certain strategic powers in moderating the evolution of political parties (Enabulele, 2008), and the ding dong over the "Electoral Act (Amendment) Bill" between the 8th National Assembly and the executive, that culminated in the president declining assent (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2019). Furthermore, due to the irreconcilable primordial interests of members of the ruling class in Nigeria, what prevails is the presence of "(i) autonomous action by incumbent politicians and (ii) the absence of autocratic rulers who are sufficiently in control that they can dictate both the content and the pace of events during the transition" (Schmitter, 2014:10). As a result of this, a vicious cycle subsists that accounts for the outcomes of transition in Nigeria identified above.

The challenges concerning political parties with regard to democratization appear to have assumed a global trend with diverse dimensions. Schmitter (2014:74) argues that political parties are opportunists that rarely contribute to the process, but "after elections of uncertain outcome had been convoked, they immediately moved in and displaced the



various associations, movements and heroic individuals that had contributed so much more.” Hofmeister and Grabow (2011:9), Schmitter (2014:79) argue that aside the purposes of “formal organization of electoral competition at all levels of government which makes political parties remain indispensable,” Micklethwait and Wooldridge (2014), Schmitter (2014) and Rowsell cited in the National Democratic Institute (2017) note that a global decline has been observed in terms of its formation or emergence, membership and their obligations, sustenance and demise, relevance to the democratization process, resulting in voter apathy, etc.

The assertion above captures Nigeria’s scenario where the “pro-democracy and human rights movement successfully mobilized against military rule and contributed to the country’s return to democratic rule in 1999” (Obi, 2011:370). But aside the collective will and resolve to dislodge the military from the country’s politics that bounded these groups together during the struggle, they have no comprehensive plan on how to midwife the democratization process thereafter. As Obi (2011:370) observes, the “changed terrain” created divisions amongst their ranks; in the midst of this confusion and lack of consensus on the way forward, the “political parties” cash in on the opportunity and hijack the transition process till date. Owing to this singular oversight, the “pro-democracy and human rights movement” occupy the periphery, while the government that emerges through the “political parties” has continued to be at the centre of the democratization, dominating and shaping the process through the instrumentality of the state.

Framework of Analysis

The Structural-Functional approach advanced by Gabriel Almond (1956) argues that there are structures that perform certain functions in every political system. He identifies political party as one of the structures that drives a political system. The approach explains the role of political parties in democratization through its input-out functions analysis. It posits that political parties perform input functions like aggregating interests, socialization, communication, recruitment and mobilization, which improve the process. When in power or forms the government, members of political parties constitute the executive, legislature, and appoints members of the judiciary. They perform output functions like making of laws, their application and adjudication that consolidate democracy. It is noted that while this may be obtainable in matured democracies like the India, United States, Canada, etc, it is hardly the case in Nigeria and some other emerging democracies. We located the failure of political parties in Nigeria to perform similar functions within the framework of the Elite theory.

Variants of the elite theory ascribed to Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels and Max Weber respectively explain how the elite who are usual few in numbers, dominate and control the society. We adopted Pareto’s version of the theory. There is a convergence



of Pareto's (1935) governing, non-governing and political elite in the country. Furthermore, his arguments on "the law of circulation of elites" and the second sign which shows that the elites are declining – "elites loss its rapacity and greed for the goods of others, but rather tends as much as possible to increase its unlawful appropriations and indulge in major usurpation of the national patrimony" (Pareto, 1968:59), aptly explains the Nigeria's scenario. As a rentier state, the ruling class capitalizes on the prevailing milieu to personalize power and politics, frustrate the evolution of political parties through obsolete extant laws and instruments of the state to sustain its interest. The existing "political parties" through their character and activities obstruct rather than consolidate democracy in the country.

The 1999 Constitution and Formation of "Political Parties"

The 1999 constitution is the grundnorm of Nigeria's fourth republic and the *fons et origo* for the formation of "political parties" in the period under review. In Section 229, the constitution defines political party as "any association whose activities include canvassing for votes in support of a candidate for election to the office of President, Vice-President, Governor, Deputy Governor or membership of a legislative house or of a local government council." This loose definition merely emphasizes (i) election and (ii) the political platform for participation in the election, nothing more. Given the history and experience of transition in Nigeria since independence, it fails to take into cognizance concrete measures, like requisite rules that will regulate the antics of the ruling elite based on their antecedents with regard to "political parties" formation and activities in the country. We argue that this could be deliberate in order to protect and serve the interest of the ruling class that pilots the transition process both under the military and civilian regimes. The dominance of retired military officers in political offices following the 1999 general elections and subsequently, as observed by Isaacs (2003), Obi (2011:374) attest to this position.

It is the constitution's position on what constitutes a political party that boosts the emergence of political associations contrived by cliques of the ruling elite and a few other personalities respectively recognized as "political parties," upon registration by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Section 222 of the 1999 constitution and Section 78(7) of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) stipulate the conditions that will be met before an association could be registered as a "political party". Based on the prevailing realities in Nigeria and the genuine need to democratize, a critical appraisal of these conditions shows their superficiality and incompleteness as they give wide latitude for any association to emergence as a "political party" leveraging Section 40 of the Constitution. In recognition of this lapse, the Nigeria Legal Information Institute (2002) observed that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in the build up to the 2003 general elections attempted to regulate the formation or emergence political parties



through its “Guidelines for the Registration of Political Parties dated 15 May 2002, released to the public on 17 May 2002”.

However, according to the Nigeria Legal Information Institute (2002), crucial and strategic aspects of the Guidelines were nullified and declared null and void by the Supreme Court of Nigeria. This serves as a springboard for the emergence of various recognized and registered political platforms for contesting elections in the country that posture as “political parties”. In support of this, while we observed that between 1999 and 2019 (twenty years into the fourth republic) six general elections were conducted; Hamalai, Egwu and Omotola (2017), the EU Election Observation Mission (2019) noted that the number of “political parties” that contested the elections increased from 3 in 1999 to 30 in 2003, to 63 in 2007, which dropped to 25 in 2011, later increased to 27 in 2015 and 91 in 2019.

According to the Nigeria Legal Information Institute (2002), the Supreme Court in its ruling observes that: “Unduly to restrict the formation of political parties or stifle their growth, ultimately, weakens the democratic culture”. While we do not dispute that the proliferation of political parties may be ideal for a democracy as obtainable in “India with a total of 2,334 political parties as of March 2019, which breakdown shows 7 National political parties, 26 State political parties and 2,301 Unrecognized political parties. Brazil has 36 political parties, and South Africa has 613 (Sic), which 314 are National and 299 are Provincial parties (Akinpelu, 2019). However, we argue that this must be done in perspective as it should be a function of a country’s level of development and extant rules governing democratization, which must be in consonance with the trend and dynamics of development trajectories as obtainable in the afore-mentioned countries with large number of political parties. For instance, in the cases of India and South Africa referenced above, political parties are categorized and all of them are not eligible to contest for every election, this is not the case in Nigeria. Thus, Abati (2019) argues that:

“The emergence of many political parties may give the impression of a flourishing multi-party democracy but when these political parties are no better than special purpose vehicles or briefcase parties to promote a personality or to raise funds and launder money, then indeed, there should be cause for concern”.

In a similar vein, the Nigeria Legal Information Institute (2002) observed that the Supreme Court in its ruling cited above equally notes that:

“However, to leave political parties completely unregulated and unmonitored may eventually make the democratic system so unmanageable as to become a hindrance to progress, national unity, good government and the growth of a healthy democratic culture”.



What Constitutes a Political Party?

At the ‘heart’ of a democracy is election, and political party is the platform for participation in an election (Duverger, 1964). Muno (2012) traced the “history of wave of democratization” that led to the emergence of democracy to the United States of America. Angle (1954), Hamilton, Madison and Jay (1961) also ascribed the origin of political party to the United States. According to Rowaan (2015:33) like democracy, modern political parties spread across the globe by an “isomorphic diffusion process that led one legitimate institutionalized political system to move towards another”. He explains that “a process of diffusion took place: one political organization found success and/or legitimacy, after which another copied its structure, then yet another organization would copy the structure of the second (or first) organization, and so on” (Rowaan, 2015:3). This explains why political parties in most if not all political systems share common features and functions that are regarded as conventional, which distinguish them from other forms of associations. Any association that does not bear resemblance of the features, and does not perform the functions is not eligible to be described as a political party in the real or actual sense of the word.

Despite the nuances in the conceptualization of political party, definitions like: political party as "the articulate organization of society's active political agents, those who are concerned with the control of governmental power and who compete for popular support with another group or groups holding divergent views. As such, it is the great intermediary which links social forces and ideologies to official governmental institutions and relates them to political action within the larger political community" (Neumann, 1956:396). Hofmeister and Grabow (2011:12) describe political party “as permanent associations of citizens that are based on free membership and a programme, and which are anxious to occupy through the path of elections, the politically decisive positions of the country with their team of leaders, in order to materialize suggestions for resolving outstanding problems”. These definitions capture largely the essence of modern political party irrespective of place.

In the light of the above, political parties facilitate or impede the development of a country. They are charged with unique functions which no other institution performs, like aggregation of interests, unifying the citizens and developing the country. The primacy of politics observed in the interface between politics and the economy, ascribes to political parties leverage to perform these functions or not. Nnoli (2003), Mersel (2006) observe that upon assumption of power, political parties regulate governmental and political institutions, formulate and execute public policies, programmes and projects. When in opposition, they mount pressure, act as check and cause the ruling party to be responsive to the interest of the public. However, the actions and inactions of political parties and their leaders like gaps between the government and the people, absence of



democratization within political parties, the dominance of strongmen that weaken political parties and democratic institutions, especially, in young democracies, etc, tend to have promoted autocratic rules, impeded rather than facilitated development. Wollack (2002) observed that these were the cases in Russia, Pakistan, Peru, Venezuela, Bangladesh, and Kura (200) in Nigeria and Africa.

“Political Parties” in Nigeria: Characteristics and Activities

In this section, the analysis on the character and activities of recognized and registered political associations that contest elections in Nigeria do not portray them as political parties in the real sense of the word. They rarely promote democratization and development as evident in the issues discussed below:

Ideological deficit: Ideology is a cardinal thrust of a political party and one of its permanent features (Nnoli, 2003; Breth, & Quibell, 2003). Ideological commitment, Scarrow (2005) observes distinguishes political parties, defines its organizational structure and decisions as well as attract their memberships. The level of ideological deficit that characterize “political parties” in Nigeria’s fourth republic (Van de Walle, 2003; Ogundiya, 2011) cannot be overemphasized. While Adebayo (2018) notes that their constitutions and manifestoes (where obtainable) rarely differs from one another, Nwauche (2013) observes that they are not connected with the Chapter II of the country’s constitution that emphasizes state’s principles and objectives. This underscores why the Guidelines identified above in its “No 3(d)(iv) prescribes that an association seeking registration as a political party must show” “a provision that its Constitution and Manifesto conform with the provisions of the 1999 Constitution, the Electoral Act of 2001 and these guidelines” (Nigeria Legal Information Institute, 2002).

Lack of membership: “Political parties” in Nigeria do not have membership in a manner obtainable in South Africa’s African National Congress, Zimbabwe’s ZANU PF, the United States’ Republican and Democratic parties, etc. In Nigeria, the elite who are the founders of the major “political parties” and their cronies are their members. Others who are in one “political party” at the lower levels are also in possession of the membership cards of all the other ‘political parties’ that are active, as they serve as *permit* for them to access the lucre. This explains the high frequency of defections amongst politicians in the country. The ruling “political party” - All Progressive Congress (APC) – for instance, could not abide by its decision to conduct Direct Primary for the 2019 general elections due to the absence of verifiable membership register (Vanguard Newspaper, 2018). On the other hand, the minor “political parties” are deliberately evolved to be devoid of membership in order to achieve the selfish purpose of those who registered them, as we analyzed below. It was in the light of this that the Guidelines cited above in its “No 3(e) prescribes that an association seeking registration as a political party must have” “a register showing the names,



residential addresses of persons in at least 24 States of the Federation and FCT who are members of the association" (Nigeria Legal Information Institute, 2002).

Notoriety of defection: Defection is a common feature of the Nigeria's "political parties". Ali and Abubakar (2019) argue that it is unprecedented in the fourth republic. This ugly act has gained currency and notoriety with sustained momentum that it has become a norm. Each election season is characterized by mass defections in no particular direction, whether to the opposition or ruling party. The driving force is where those defecting envisage that their interests will be most served and protected. Because it serves the elite's interest, there is no provision to stem the tide.

Contingency or fall back: Most of the "political parties" in Nigeria exist only on records. Little wonder Abati (2019) described them as "special purpose vehicles or briefcase parties." Madunagu (2020) observes the scheming within the Nigerian ruling class, thus, its members tend to align and realign at any given time based on selfish interest and personal gains at the expense of transition process. We argue that to guard against the chances of been schemed out of the power game in the build up to elections, like denying them the opportunity to contest or sponsor people for elective positions on the platforms of the major "political parties," they float other "political parties" as a contingency or fall back. This explains partly why they rarely strive to engage in acts that will boost democratization like improving the legal frameworks that govern political party formation, transition process, elections management and administration, and democratic institutions.

Bargaining chip: We argue that those who register minor "political parties" use them as basis for negotiating the advancement of their personal interest in several ways, rather than democratization of the country. First, due to the large number of these "parties," they become unwieldy and cumbersome for the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) which operations are still rooted deeply in the analog system to handle. In the face of this, the possibility of omitting a "political party's" name, logo or having its name spelt wrongly on the ballot paper is high, which the National Democratic Institute (2008) observes could nullify affected election when challenged in court. Given the high degree of electoral outcomes uncertainty and enormous cost implications that are associated with the conduct of elections in Nigeria, a winner in an election conducted under such a circumstance will prefer to 'settle' with the affected "party" and its candidate(s) out of court.

Second, the Electoral Act, 2010, Independent National Electoral Commission (2019:3) provide that each "political party" is entitled to "appoint one person as its polling agent for each Polling Unit". We observe that the owners of minor "political parties" collect the tags of their "political party's" Agents (who they have carefully positioned in advance to work at the respective polling unit where they are registered voters) from the electoral commission and hand them over to a major "political party" for an agreed fee in return for



the votes of these Agents. The numbers of polling units in question determine the proportion of votes being sold and bought. Third, post-election petitions litigation is inevitable because of how the electoral process is managed and administered. The candidates of minor “political parties” that contested elections readily avail themselves to be drafted as witnesses at the tribunal and courts to collaborate the position of any major “political party” that is favourably disposed to meeting their terms and conditions.

Conspiracy/Gang up against major “political parties”: It is equally observed that minor “political parties” jettison their respective platforms and literally conspire and gang up against the major “political parties” during gubernatorial and presidential elections. These “parties” and their candidates will step down at the last moment before the elections and declare support for the major “political parties.” For instance, the EU Election Observation Mission (2019:10) vividly captures the scenario during the 2019 general elections when it notes that:

“For the presidential race, 51 parties supported the PDP candidate, even though many of these theoretically had their own presidential candidates. Similarly, a grouping of around 14 parties backed President Buhari. There were also multiple instances of smaller parties announcing their support for leading governorship contenders in Bauchi, for example, 20 governorship candidates and 32 parties backed the PDP opposition candidate; in Kwara, 35 parties joined the APC opposition campaign”.

Source of livelihood: There are politicians who have no other job or trade, except participation in party politics; we refer to them here as *professional politicians*. We argue that they do not form minor “political parties” to contribute towards democratic consolidation; rather, they perceive their act as a source of livelihood. They raise funds for themselves through the sale of their “parties” forms and tickets. This thrives mainly because the major “political parties” Ikeanyibe (2014) observes are devoid of internal party democracy. By circumvention of the rules during primary, Udeuhele (2015) notes that they pave way for aspirants with deep pockets and huge war chest to emerge as their candidates, which leads to the exodus of other aspirants to minor “political parties”. Furthermore, Section 228(c) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) provides “for an annual grant to the Independent National Electoral Commission for disbursement to political parties on a fair and equitable basis to assist them in the discharge of their functions”. Thus, Taiwo (2018) asserts that “all political parties in Nigeria are entitled to an annual support funding of N60 million (\$196,078) from the commission.” We argue that it is the target to access this incentive, and not the role that they will play in the democratization process that also accounts partly for the proliferation of recognized and registered political associations that posture as political parties in the country.

These unique characteristics and activities of the “political parties” are not mutually exclusive on how they impact democratization in the country. They tend to interact



seamlessly to throw up outcomes that compound uncertainties **are** associated with the process, manipulations of rules that govern the milieu and emasculation of democratic institutions. It is to curb these challenges that the electoral commission recently pruned their numbers from 91 to 18 (Olorok, 2020).

Perceived Attempts at Evolving Political Parties in Nigeria

There are gaps in the provisions or conditions for evolving political parties in the country, which pave ways for all shades of political associations to be recognized and registered as “political parties”. There have been efforts to fill these lacunae and evolve political parties that will improve and strengthen the country’s democratization. In this section, we identified four perceived attempts at doing so. While the first and second could be described as proactive, we regard the third to be in-between reactionary and spontaneous, and the fourth as reactionary.

The first was the outright ban of the “old breed” politicians from participation in the transition process in the aborted third republic, and the imposition of only two political parties, namely: the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) by the military junta under the watch of Ibrahim Babangida (Ojo, 2004). We observe that these measures were in response to the antecedents of the “old breed” politicians and their “political parties” in the previous republics respectively, and a bold attempt to check their reoccurrence. According to Ayoade (2008) it aimed at evolving political parties for all, build a sense of their collective ownership amongst the members, create a level playing field for all, and prevent the ruling elite from hijacking the political parties and the transition process. Though, the transition ended abruptly on a negative note; however, Ekundayo (2013:29), Atim (2013:135) argue that the attempt produced a presidential election adjudged as the best in annals of the country’s chequered history.

An attempt to introduce the “Guidelines for the Registration of Political Parties, 2002, by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)” towards the build up to the 2003 general elections was the second. By this measure, the commission attempted to fill some of the perceived gaps in the conditions provided by Section 222 of the Constitution for the emergence of political parties. According to Abati (2019) “political parties are registered based on stipulated rules and guidelines, and where those provisions spelt out in the relevant statutes are not met, such parties do not live up to the billing of being regarded as political parties.” The Guidelines attempted to introduce strategic conditions like: a clear-cut ideological stance and manifesto, verifiable evidence of membership and administrative structures, safety valves against proliferation of political parties, defections, and party financing, amongst others. Unfortunately, vested interest through the instrumentality of the court nullified these aspects of the Guidelines. We argue that their strict implementation would have set the tone for the emergence of political parties in Nigeria.



The third was advocacy for the “Not Too Young to Run Bill.” The campaign, we argue afforded the army of young people in the country an opportunity to evolve political parties, but it was missed. Onwughalu and Obiorah (2018) observe that the agitation for reduction in age limit for elective offices was a reactionary campaign that elicited spontaneous local and international support. However, they argue that it lacks a comprehensive or wholistic plan, as it did not factor in what young people should do beyond passage of the bill. As a result, the chance to evolve political parties differently from what were in existence by young people given the strength of its population and the overwhelming support the campaign garnered was wasted.

The fourth was invocation of the regulatory powers conferred on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) by the 1999 constitution and Section 78(7) of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) respectively to de-register “political parties” on the following grounds –(i) “breach of any of the requirements for registration; and (ii) for failure to win Presidential or Governorship election or a seat in the National or State Assembly election”. Hamalai, Egwu and Omotola (2017:59), Abati (2019), Ojo (2020) observe that the electoral commission has exercised this power twice in 2012 when it de-registered thirty-nine (39) and 2020 when it de-registered seventy-four (74) “political parties” respectively.

Challenges to Evolving Political Parties in Nigeria

We note that evolving political parties in the country could be difficult because of the vested interest of the ruling class, but it is not impossible. We argue that the interaction of the milieu, perception of politics, personalization of power, cost of elections, obsolete extant laws, political apathy and high rate of illiteracy pose serious challenges to evolving political parties in Nigeria.

The environment is characterized by weak institutions, which the ruling elite have deliberately designed to barely enforce rules and sanctions that will facilitate democratization. These encourage and sustain other factors that impede the formation of political parties in the actual sense of the word, like the emergence of “strong men” at the expense of “political parties” who bend and break extant rules for primordial reasons. A few examples are Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), and President Muhammadu Buhari when he was of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC). Balmas, Rahat, Sheaffer and Shenhav (2014) observe that the personality cult of such “strong men” who have become rallying point for their followers obstruct the formation of political parties. Their personalization of politics translates to personalization of power, which grants them unhindered access to stifle opposition, manipulate the electoral process and elections outcomes (Agbu, 2012; Ololajulo, 2016). Given this scenario, the evolution of political parties which are the recognized platforms to contest for elective offices is deliberately designed to promote the interest of ruling elite. As we observed in the



preceding sections, attempts at reviewing the rules guiding the evolution of the platform were frustrated tactically as evident in the Supreme Court's judgement on the "Guidelines for the Registration of Political Parties, 2002," and the President's refusal to assent to the Electoral Reform Bill forwarded by the 8th National Assembly (Enabulele, 2008; Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2019).

This paper argues that the above scenarios thrive mainly because of the existence of moribund laws that regulate both the milieu and democratization in the country. The 1999 constitution for instance, is an embodiment of such legal frameworks. The ruling elite through personalization of power deliberately ensure that the laws are not reviewed regularly to deal with the challenges of evolving political parties in the actual sense of the word. Hofmeister and Grabow (2011:9) argue that "political parties will only be able to fulfil their functions when more citizens are willing to engage politically in parties." This appears to be very remote in Nigeria as the activities of "political parties" and their leaders account more for apathy than participation. The unwillingness of the people to participate in politics is a function of dashed hope in the process, lack of confidence and trust in the system. These are compounded by majority of the citizens' ignorance of their inalienable right to a choice of government and participation in governance, due to high level of illiteracy in the country.

Conclusion

The interrelationships amongst democracy, elections and political parties are such that one can hardly be discussed in isolation without recourse to others. Democracy could be attained through activities amongst which are free and fair elections, contested by political parties, which underscores their importance in democratization. Therefore, political party whether in power or opposition plays crucial roles that shape transitions, hence, their centrality in the process.

We have examined the Nigeria's experience at democratization in the fourth republic, zeroing in on the political parties as agent of the process. Our analysis show that more than twenty years into the republic, six general elections have been conducted, and the number of "political parties" that participated increased with successive elections. In spite of these, democracy is not consolidated as the country transit from one government to another. The major reasons for these are the actions and inactions of the ruling elite, who have hijacked the process, manipulating it to serve their selfish interest. Political parties are the only recognized platforms to vie for elective offices in the country. The ruling elite have through government instruments prevented revision of the legal frameworks governing the process to allow for evolution of political parties, in the actual sense of the world, or the recognition of independent candidates.



A few attempts at addressing these challenges during military to civilian, and civilian to civilian administration failed. They did because there was lack of sincerity of purpose, little or no political awareness that fuelled apathy, which caused the ruling elite to dominate the political space. The “political parties” that evolved, whether in power or opposition rarely perform the functions political parties in thriving democracies do to promote democratization, like mobilizing the citizens to be members of political parties, educate them on the electoral system, inculcate political culture in them, agitate and ensure the improvement of extant legal frameworks, etc. This is because the “political parties” are mainly creation of the ruling elite, deliberately designed not to improve the process.

However, recent events from the state of democratization in the country, like fallouts of the #EndSARS protests and scheming within the major “political parties,” the ruling All Progressives Congress and main opposition the Peoples Democratic Party on where to zone their presidency in 2023 presidential election, may change the scenario. The former shows resistance to the ruling elite and their antics. It is expected that young people who stage the protests will evolve political parties that are different from those in existence to change the status. The manifest difference in the personal interests amongst members of the ruling elite, with regard to the latter is expected to create cracks in their hegemony, which may affect the level of their manipulation of the process. Finally, one of the agencies perceived as strategic in subverting the citizens will expressed at the polls during elections was at the centre of the protests. The message has been communicated clearly through the protests, that it may not be business as usual.

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