JOURNAL OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE
ISSN Print: 2992-2763 – ISSN Online: 2992-4618 | Vol. 2, Issue 1, No. 2 / March 2024
https://www.jopd.com.ng

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN THE SUSTAINANCE OF NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE, 2015-2023

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ABSTRACT
Democracy can only flourish when there is a systemic, constructive and critical opposition in place. The sustenance of Nigeria's democratic practice requires checks and balances on democratic practices, processes and institutions. Before and after the 2015, 2019 and the 2023 general elections, some opposition party leadership and their members decamped en masse to the ruling party. The outcome of this political somersault is that today one of the strongest political parties in the ongoing political dispensation, the People's Democratic Party, PDP, has become so weakened that the possibility of its waging any kind of effective opposition to the national government is slim. This study aims to examines and evaluate the role of political opposition in the sustenance of Nigeria's democratic practice, especially in terms of the performance of the opposition political parties in 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections through qualitative - descriptive tool and content analysis largely derived from documentary method of data collection. It adopts the pluralist theory as its framework of analysis. The paper find out that there is no formidable political opposition group with capable and committed leaders ready to pool resources and fight good battle for the sustenance of democratic practices in Nigeria. It also finds out that the incumbent government tries its best to see that the opposition remains in a disadvantaged position at all situations. It therefore recommends that in a pluralist society, such as Nigeria, it is important that both the ruling party and opposition parties while reflecting this plurality and diverse opinions as well as views should strictly adhere to democratic principles, in order to ensure that genuine democratic practice is sustained on a sound and a solid foundation.

Keywords: Political Opposition, Political Parties, Democracy, Elections, Democratic Practice.

Introduction

In order to create and nurture a system that allows and encourages systemic, constructive and critical opposition as an agent of political change. It is the view of this paper that since the end of military rule in 1999 makes it necessary to reassess various aspects of democratic practices, of which political opposition is a very important element, in order to ensure that genuine democracy is sustained on a sound and solid foundation. Therefore, it is very significant to examine the importance of political opposition in the sustenance of democratic practice. Democracy is a system of government which allows public expression of opinion and accommodation of divergent views. In this way, democracy and freedom of speech are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. Generally, whatever democracy has been established and sustained, be it in Western Europe and America or the Third World Countries of Africa, Asia Latin America or centralized democracies of Eastern Europe, it is because freedom of

speech and the right to oppose are allowed. The level of political tolerance of any government is essentially determined by its willingness to accommodate dissenting views, accept criticisms of its conduct from opposition political parties, interest groups or individuals. Without political opposition, politics is bereft of its substance. But what is opposition? The opposition comprises one or more political parties or other organized groups that are opposed, primarily and ideologically, to the government, party or group in control of a city, region, state, country or other political body. The degree of opposition varies according to political conditions. For example, in authoritarian and democratic systems, opposition may be respectively repressed or desired. Members of an opposition generally serve as antagonists to the other parties.

Even though opposition has sometimes been misunderstood and, as often, misrepresented, there was a time when it was accepted almost as second nature of Nigerian politicians. But today their successors had all but forgotten it; and despite the many waves of democratization that had swept our shore, Nigerians were still grappling with its elementary rudiments, and could not quite accept it as a legitimate part of democratic electoral politics.

The current wave of democratization sweeping across Africa, which showcases the provision of fostering democratic values among Africans (Huntington, 1991) and much of the developing democracies, is being sorely tested on several different fronts. It is marred by a plethora of electoral malpractices, voter intimidation, election rigging, political violence, result falsification, ethnic and religious tensions, lack of courageous and incorruptible judiciary and massive corruption in the public service. Without effective and enforceable electoral laws, the system becomes unable to guarantee free, fair and credible elections.

In the long run, however, these are not the only danger that poses serious threat to the sustainability of Nigeria's democratic practice; lack of effective opposition poses greater danger. Even if free and fair elections could somehow be guaranteed, the democratic practice would still be in great peril without an effective opposition movement. The logic is simple to understand. Since democracy is based on political competition with eventual majority rule, the minority, as opposition, should act to check the excesses of the majority. The opposition should be the people's watchdog keeping the government on its toes and forcing it to follow the right democratic path. It does this by monitoring, challenging and criticizing the policies of the government; and, in their place, formulating and publicizing alternative courses of action. This paper therefore is aimed at examining the critical roles political opposition parties can play in the sustenance of democracy.

Conceptual Clarifications

Democracy

Democracy is a representative government in which a society decides who should govern it for a specific period of time. In democracy, people have the power and the ability to participate in, mostly through their elected representatives. Thus, a democratic government is form of governance that enables the electorate to determine who should rule, and also provides adequate institutional mechanisms through which peoples' demands for responsiveness and accountability can be articulated and in practice accommodated and actualized. Therefore, the goodness or otherwise of democracy depends wholly in both the demand and the supply aspect of the political system.

Political Opposition

The concept of political opposition comprises one or more political parties or other organized groups that are opposed ideologically to the government, party or group in political control of city, state, country or other political body. Thus, for Schapiro (2004), political opposition is defined as ''an organized political group, or groups, of which the aim is to oust the government in power and to replace it by one of its own choosing''. Meaning that political opposition has most often been limited to one specific arena: the parliament, to one specific actor: the minority parties with one supposed major goal of taking over power. The opposition is essential for a functional democratic practice, by checking the party in power.

Political Parties

Political parties are the traditional vehicles for selection and fielding of candidates for elections, especially in liberal democracy or electoral democracy. They provide an avenue or platform through which those that want to represent the people in elective positions are elected/selected and contest in the elections.

They equally aggregate and represent interests, develop manifestoes and programme of activities, popularise candidates to the electorates, select candidates and field them for elections on the basis of their acceptance of, commitment to, and advocacy for, these programmes and manifestoes, and get the elected party members to be guided by these in the discharge of their responsibilities as elected members of legislative and/or executive organs/branches of government. In this regard, political parties discharge the role of first, recruiting members, second, selection and election of candidates within them, and third, presenting or 'fielding' those they have recruited, selected/elected to compete with those recruited, selected/elected by other political parties for the electorate to evaluate, rate, and elect from amongst them in local or national elections (Jega, 2022).

How a political party handles its internal membership recruitment, selection/election processes, has significant impact on the wider national electoral and democratic processes. As is often said, democracy cannot be nourished and sustained by undemocratic means. Democracy can only be sustained and consolidated by democratic ways and means. Only democrats using democratic values, beliefs and processes can ultimately help build, nurture, sustain and consolidate democratic gains. Thus, the extent to which political parties are built and operated by democratic tenets, and their candidates recruited, selected/elected by transparently democratic processes, has significant bearing on the extent to which it contributes to electoral integrity within the party and in the wider national electoral and democratic processes (Jega, 2022).

In the Nigerian context, historically and contemporarily, the nature of development of political parties, especially how they were/are established, how their structures, organizational, decision making and candidate selection processes have evolved and impacted on the wider Nigerian electoral and democratization processes, are in extensive variance with universal expectations, and considerably leave much to be desired. The prevailing internal dynamics of the political parties affect their efficacy and effectiveness as true interest aggregators and positive mobilisers for electoral politics and also essentially, negatively, impact the sustenance of Nigeria's democratic practice.

Volumes of literature have been documented, analysed and explained how political parties have been formed, shaped, controlled and directed by so-called 'moneybags' and 'god-fathers', with negative consequences on electoral integrity and democratic governance. What has not yet been as voluminously studied is the emergent trend, since 1999, of what can be termed as small-scale 'political entrepreneurs', who registered what can be termed as 'briefcase' and residential parlour-housed 'political parties'; some of whom, until 2011, almost solely relied on INEC grants for personal enrichment; while most, opportunistically offered their party platforms to some candidates, who lost primary elections in other parties, to contest national elections, upon payment of agreed fees. This type of 'parties' populated the political and electoral arenas, until INEC, relying on provisions in the legal framework, stopped the grants, and embarked on the deregistration of political parties.

An objective review and analysis of the nature and disposition of political parties in contemporary Nigeria indicate the following:

- They are not well structured, organized and managed
- They pay little if any attention to membership recruitment and mobilization
- They lack well trained professional cadre staff and do little, if any, serious training for skills acquisition and competency enhancement for existing staff
- They rely substantially, if not solely, for funding from a small clique of 'moneybags' and 'god-fathers'
- Many, if not most, operate, quite often, in breach of existing electoral legal framework and, even, regardless of their own constitutions, regulations and guidelines
- They are operated/managed essentially undemocratically

- They are characterised by quarrelsomeness, litigation and factionalism internally, and by conflicts and violent confrontations in inter-party relations
- They engage with the electoral process with a disposition to win, not "fair and square" but using "all means necessary" (money, abuse of power and privilege, fraud, intimidation of voters and harassment, use of court injunction and judgement, violence, etc.). Indeed, a dangerous emerging trend, with regards to the engagement of political parties with the electoral process, is the increasing shift from inducement/recruitment of election officials to perpetrate irregularities (such as allowing unregistered/non-accredited persons to vote, ballot box stuffing, alteration or change result declaration forms, etc.), which increasing use of technology has virtually eliminated, to reckless and brazen vote-buying. This has flourished, in the context of voter apathy and indifference to electoral outcome, as well as ignorance of the intrinsic value of the vote to bring about credible and responsible representation, as well as good democratic governance.

- They pay little if any attention to driving, or contributing to, electoral reforms to enhance the integrity of elections; rather, many work assiduously to undermine value-additions to the integrity of elections (Jega, 2022).

It is clear that a combination of all these restricts the capacity of Nigeria's political parties to contribute positively to democratic development and therefore, essentially undermine the scope of democratic sustainability.

Theoretical Framework

The paper focuses on the relationship between political opposition and sustainability of Nigeria's democratic practice. The purpose is to understand the extent to which political opposition influence the sustenance of democratic practice in Nigeria through constructive criticism and checking the government in power. The paper adopted the pluralist theory, which espouses the diversity in a society comprising competing units for political power. Important theorists of pluralism include Dahl Roald., Stepan Antthony Smith., David Trauma, and Martin, Sally Lorraine. In pluralism, the central government act as a mediator rather than an all-powerful position that rules unchallenged. This fits well in the original creation of the United States, where the founding fathers wished to move away from the very centralized, elite government of England. Pluralism encourages competition between groups as they try to come up with the best way to deal with issues, so the society continues to move forward. Although there is value to theory, it is not an official system recognized by the United States government. Pluralism critiques direct democracy and instead puts power in groups, such as unions, civil rights groups, lobbies and coalitions. This theory does not necessarily mean that all groups are equal or have the same amount of power. Pluralism is especially relevant for Nigeria, which has a decentralized government with many powers given to individual states, which then give powers to local governments to further decentralize power. Within each level of government there are also different parts of the system so that no one person or group has too much power. Separation of power and the system of checks and balances is an essential part of pluralist theory. The central question for classical pluralism is how power and influence are distributed in a political process. Groups of individuals try to maximize their interests. Likes of conflict are multiple and changing as power is a continuous bargaining process between competing groups. There may be inequalities but they tend to be disseminated and evened out by the diverse forms and distributions of resources all over a population. Any change under this view will be dawdling and incremental, as groups have diverse interests and may act 'veto groups' to destroy legislation. The existence of diverse and competing interests is the basis for a democratic equilibrium, and is vital for the obtainment of goals by individuals. A polyarchy, a circumstance of open competition for electoral support within a significant part of the adult population, ensures competition of group interests and relative equality. This theory postulates that the civil rights, such as choice of expression, organization and an electoral system with at least two political parties.

Three of the major tenets of the pluralist school are (1) resources and hence potential power are widely scattered throughout society; (2) at least some resources are available to nearly everyone; and (3) at any time the amount of potential power exceeds the amount of actual power. Finally, and

perhaps most important, no one party is all-powerful unless proven through empirical observation. An individual or group that is influential in one realm may be weak in another. Pluralists believe that with few exceptions power holders usually having a relatively limited scope of influence. It therefore follows that no group or political party is sufficiently powerful to control the context of Nigerian political society grappling with grand corruption, insecurity, unemployment, ethnicity and other socio-political cum economic issues which are major obstacle towards the sustainability of Nigeria's democratic practice. This is because the complexity and multiplicity of ethnic groups is compounded by an equal multiplicity and complexity of religious groups of the Nigerian population (Ogunna, 1999).

Applying this theory to the paper, the political opposition parties should form a coalition with the party in government and strictly act as a check that will balance the governance domain of the party in power with any little position they grasp in any tier of government in Nigeria. It does not necessarily mean that a party must be in power to strictly adhere to democratic principles. By so doing there will be a shift during election of the mode of individual political party present for elective position, also despite all manipulations there will be room for more coalition in government, using the good works of the opposition as a parameter by the electorates.

Consequently, this should be a shift from political predatory metaphors of grievance, forgery and greed from both opposition parties and the party in power. Being aware of the character of Nigerian state of the party in power monopolizing every government agencies including the judiciary, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the major opposition party in 2019 and 2023 presidential elections could have used the finances used in court cases, in developmental issues, focusing on poverty eradication, youth and women empowerment as well as education enhancement by so doing joining in tackling the societal problems. This measure directly or indirectly will not only showcase the opposition party but will curtail corruption and poor leadership. The party in power will have no option but to gear towards reducing hardship knowing well that the opposition can take upper hand to woe the citizen with their good works if care is not properly taken. It is highly significant to embrace a new political patriotic dispensation of values, views and vision from both the party in power and the political opposition parties for the sustenance of democratic practice to prevail in a pluralistic society like Nigeria that need the pluralist theory to sustain its democratic practices.

Political Opposition and Sustenance of Democratic Practice in Nigeria

The key of political opposition for sustainability of democratic practice has been argued for by many of the world leading political thinkers, such as, Plato, Machavialli, Thomas Paine, Karl Marx, Aristotle and Jurgen Harbermas. In fact, the correlation between constructive opposition and the sustainability of democratic practice is held to be such that they are often considered as the pillar or cornerstone of democratic governance. Discourses on Nigeria's democratic practice have, therefore, not failed to recognize the importance of political opposition in sustaining democratic practice. Since the First Republic and during the subsequent transitions to democracy, political opposition have sprouted, became engaged in sustaining democratic project, gained in stature and necessarily suffered from a number of the ruling parties. The experience of the country, throughout its political and electoral history, has seemingly supported the notion of 'indispensability' of both the ruling party and opposition parties for the democratic practice. The same history has also drawn attention to the myriad of concerns that must necessarily be addressed in order to strengthen the capacity of political parties to make the desired contribution to the sustainability of the democratic practice (Lawan, 2018).

Yet, and perhaps even against the background of the utility of the political opposition for the sustenance of democratic practice, both covert and overt attempts have been at play in the engineering and reengineering of the opposition political parties in many countries, including in the particular context of Nigeria, the authoritarian antics of the military during the General Ibrahim Babangida's reign, in the decreeing into existence and the state supervised regulation of the two political parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC), that contested the elections in the Third Republic. This snag in the development of political parties, political

opposition and the other similar interferences during the subsequent regimes has added to the travails of the country's democratic practice (Zaiyan, 2015).

The question as to whether or not political opposition possess the capacity to deepen the sustainability of democratic practice in Nigeria is, deriving from the aforesaid, a vital one, especially given the performance of political opposition in the country's political terrain. To respond appropriately to the question, one must come to terms with the structure of the Nigerian society, the emergence of political parties and how that give birth to the nature of party politics in the state. The historical antecedents of the Nigerian society, and most notably, the plurality of the Nigerian society occasioned by the colonization and the amalgamation of different political entities, make the challenge of national integration rather herculean. This state of affairs has not been helped by some of the political institutions and other state agencies that are saddled with the task of promoting national integration, but which have remained weak and inefficient in the discharge of their statutory responsibilities. The political parties, stemming from the above situation, were fluid, particularly as they relate to the values of national integration, good governance and more importantly, the sustainability of democratic practices in Nigeria. But, while it must be appreciated that the earliest political parties in Nigeria, notably the Nigerian National Development Party (NNDP), the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and Action Congress (AG) were at the forefront in the struggle for political independence in the country, yet even at the verge of independence and soon after the attainment of political independence, they were balkanized along regional and ethnic lines, thereby greatly affecting the institutionalization of the first set of political parties that were founded in the country (Adejumobi, 2005).

This development set the face for the regionalization of party politics in Nigeria and impacted negatively on the pattern of struggle for independence and the political development of the post colonial Nigerian state, often shaping the nature of inter and intra-party relations in the country, basically characterized with hostility, suspicion and unhealthy competition for political power between and among the regionalized and ethnic based political parties. These, to a large extent, helped to frustrate the country's first attempt at sustaining democracy in the country in the First Republic, leading to its untimely collapse (Nyemetu and Obioha, 2004).

Conclusion

Political opposition is, indeed, a fundamental of democracy and sustainability project. As a matter of fact, it is an important barometer for measuring democratic practice and sustenance. Opposition parties in the Nigeria's democratic practice have come a long way in terms of opportunity to play their classic role of holding the ruling party accountable and in articulating governance alternatives. In spite of the individual parties, many ills are still afflicting them. These include ethno-regional orientation, religious politics and opportunism, personality politics and the rampant cases of decamping in all the parties. These, indeed, are noticeable issues of the political opposition from the minimalist point of view. In the maximalist angle, political opposition is obviously far from sight in the period under study.

This is because, as an alternative platform for public policy conception, implementation and governance, political opposition do not exist in Nigeria. It is the standpoint of this paper that the tendency of the political class in the opposition parties is the major stumbling block to their ability to play their role as providers of alternative for sustaining democratic practice in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. For political opposition to serve as positive alternative platform of governance in the sustenance of Nigeria's democratic practice, politicians in the opposition must adopts progressive and patriotic principles and ideals. They must therefore showcase progressive stance and commitments on public and national issues and problems. This in line of thinking and commitment will eventually serve their enlightened self-interest. This is in the sense that, as ruling elites, this stance will not only sustain democratic practice which makes them relevant in the first place but will also wins the trust of the public on the efficacy of democratic institutions of political opposition.

2. The criteria for registering political parties should include a well-articulated party manifesto with clear policy orientation and direction. This will not only give the parties a clear focus, direction and identity but will also raise the level of Nigeria's democratic practice.
3. The fight against corruption must be intensified and sustained. This is because corruption is the major instrument of primitive accumulations which makes the competition for power and access to it a do or dies affair. To this extent, Nigeria's anti–graft agencies like the EFCC and ICPC must be strengthened and must also be supported by all stakeholders.
4. The political arena, in general, and political offices, in a particular, must be rendered materially unattractive. This can be achieved by drastically cutting the salaries, allowances and other privileges of political office holders.

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