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INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC PARTY AND THE OUTCOME OF THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract

Political parties are essentially the vehicles through which electoral contestation is conveyed. They are crucial democratic institutions which play fundamental roles in shaping not only how a democracy thrives, but also how development can be engendered. Internal cohesion is crucial for the victory of a party in an election. Some political parties have paid the sour prize for being enmeshed in crises before major elections. The internal dynamics and contradictions within the People's Democratic Party in shaping the outcome of the Presidential election in 2023 is an existential example to other parties. This paper, using a historical qualitative approach interrogated the factors that led to the defeat of the People's Democratic Party, and found that the internal wrangling in the party which culminated in the formation of the G-5 Governors and the consequential splinter of the party was one of the most obvious reasons for the loss of the Presidential Election by the party. The paper concludes therefore that critical reforms are needful for strengthening political parties but more needful is the adherence to laid down laws, rules, conventions and procedures of the parties by the influential few who could make or mare the chances of their parties to win elections.

Keywords: Internal party democracy, Political party, Election, Peoples Democratic Party

Introduction

Internal party democracy plays a crucial role in shaping party leadership selection and decision-making processes. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), a prominent Nigerian political party, serves as a compelling case study to explore the challenges and developments related to internal party democracy. Despite attempts to engender transparency and due process in the candidates' selection process, conflicts, power struggles, and external interference hindered the full realization of internal party democracy and internal cohesion. Internal party democracy is an important concept in the study of political parties and democratic governance. It refers to the extent to which political parties provide opportunities for their members to participate in decision-making processes, and to influence party policies and leadership selection. According to (Scarrow, 2004), internal democracy is a very broad term describing a wide range of methods for including party members in intra-party deliberations and decision-making. It is democracy within the party and the extent to which a party subscribes to and abide by the basic and universal democratic tenets. The challenge of internal party democracy in Nigeria has been a recurring challenge for political parties and has often been cited as a major factor in the instability of the country's democratic system (Ahmed & Umar, 2019).

The People's Democratic Party has been one of the dominant political parties in Nigeria since the return to civilian rule in 1999. However, the party has been plagued by internal conflicts and struggles for power which have often resulted in the fragmentation and fractionalization of the party and the loss of electoral support (Adetula & Olaopa, 2021). The PDP is a large political party with several powerful stakeholders, including former Presidents, governors, legislators, and other critical party stakeholders. These powerful individuals often use their influence to impose candidates and influence the outcome of the party's internal elections. This often leads to allegations of unfairness and favoritism which undermines the party's internal democratic mechanisms (Adeyemo, 2020). The party lacks adequate mechanisms for resolving disputes and ensuring transparency in its decision-making processes. This lack of strong institutions makes it easier for powerful individuals to influence the party's internal elections and undermine the democratic process. Additionally, the lack of strong party institutions makes it difficult for the party to enforce discipline among its members, leading to internal divisions. These divisions further weakened the party's ability to present a united front and undermined its overall electoral prospects in the 2023 Presidential Elections (Olatunji & Odunsi, 2019).

In some cases, the imposition of candidates by powerful individuals within the party led to protests and defections by party members. These defections weakened the party's electoral prospects and contributed to its poor performance in some elections. The lack of transparent and democratic processes for selecting candidates and the infighting arising from the selection of a Vice Presidential Candidate undermined the collective force of the party and led to a withdrawal of support by a group of five Governors (the G-5) including then Governors of Rivers State, Nyesom Wike, Benue State, Samuel Ortom, Oyo State, Seyi Makinde, Abia State, Okezie Ikpeazu and Enugu State, Ifeanyi Ugwanyi.

Several studies have been conducted on the issue of internal party democracy in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the PDP. For example, Olatunji & Odunsi, (2019) examined the relationship between internal party democracy and good governance in Nigeria using the PDP as a case study, while Sanni & Adetoro, Ahmed & Umar, (2019) studied the relationship between internal democracy and political stability in Nigeria, with a focus on the PDP from 2015-2019. Adeyemo, (2020) investigated the impact of internal party democracy on political stability in Nigeria using the PDP as a case study. Adetula & Olaopa, (2021) examined the challenges of internal party democracy in the PDP since 2015.

Methodology

The paper adopted a historical qualitative research approach to gain insights into the internal party processes of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and how this has impacted the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. A Historical research design involves the examination, evaluation, and explanation of past events to gain insight into the present and make reliable predictions about the future. (Obasi, 1999).

Theoretical Compass

The theoretical background of this paper is rooted in the participatory democracy theory and the cartel party theory. The participatory democracy theory argues for increased participation in decision-making processes. It emphasizes that parties should be more democratic and inclusive by involving members in candidates' selection, policy formulation, and other important party activities. This approach aims to reduce the gap between party leadership and grassroots members. On the other hand, the cartel party theory that was proposed by Richard

Katz and Peter Mair, suggests that political parties have transformed over time into "cartel like" organizations that prioritize their own interests and establish strong controls over decision-making processes, often at the expense of grassroots participation and internal democracy. According to this theory, parties focus on serving the interest of their leadership and maintaining their position within the political system, rather than fostering active membership participation and internal democracy.

Internal party democracy and election outcomes

Internal party democracy is an essential component of any democratic system, and political parties are expected to be the primary vehicle for expressing the will of the people. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria is one of the country's leading political parties, and its commitment to internal party democracy has been the subject of several debates and analyses in academic literature. The People's Democratic Party governed the country for 16 years since the return to civilian rule in 1999. The party has been involved in both national and state elections, and the extent to which it has been democratic in its internal processes has been a subject of debate among scholars and political analysts. A study by Mainwaring and Torcal, (2006) found that parties that conduct transparent primary elections tend to perform better in elections than those that rely on a small group of party elites to impose candidates.

The overall impact of internal party democracy on the performance of the PDP in national and state elections has been mixed. While the party has had some successes in elections, such as winning all the Presidential elections till 2015, it has also experienced significant losses in the years after 2015 till 2023. Party leaders often resort to undemocratic means to maintain their grip on power. This has led to a situation where party members are excluded from decision-making processes and internal party elections are often marred by irregularities and violence. While internal party democracy can lead to increased voter turnout, reduce the influence of money in politics, and enhance the legitimacy of the electoral process, the lack of internal party democracy results in internal conflicts, loss of support among voters, and poor electoral performance. Nevertheless, there have also been instances where the PDP has demonstrated a commitment to internal party democracy. For example, in 2014, the party introduced a series of reforms aimed at promoting transparency and accountability within the party. These reforms included the adoption of a new constitution, the establishment of an internal party ombudsman, and the introduction of direct primaries for the selection of party candidates (The Guardian Nigeria, 2014).

Major challenges to internal party democracy in Nigeria

In Nigeria, internal party democracy has been a significant challenge for political parties, especially since the country's return to civilian rule in 1999. This paper discusses the major challenges to internal party democracy in Nigeria.

Lack of the democratic culture:

One major challenge to internal party democracy in Nigeria is the lack of a culture of internal party democracy. According to Aleyomi, (2016) political parties in Nigeria do not have a democratic culture, and this has been a major challenge to internal party democracy. Most party leaders in Nigeria run their parties like personal businesses and do not allow for internal democracy. They often impose candidates on party members, leading to reduced participation and alienation of members.

Money politics:

Money politics is another major challenge to internal party democracy in Nigeria. According to Salawu and Agbaje, (2019), the high cost of running for office in Nigeria has made it difficult for people without deep pockets to participate in internal party elections. Party leaders often sell tickets to the highest bidder, making it impossible for individuals with little or no financial backing to participate.

Ethnic and religious sentiments:

Ethnic and religious sentiments are another challenge to internal party democracy in Nigeria. According to Ogu, (2023), political parties in Nigeria are often formed along ethnic and religious lines, making it difficult for members of other ethnic and religious groups to participate in the decision-making process. This has led to a lack of diversity in party leadership and an inability to represent the interests of all Nigerians.

Weak party structures:

Weak party structures are also a major challenge to internal party democracy in Nigeria. According to Eborka, (2016), most political parties in Nigeria lack a strong and functional structure. This makes it difficult for members to participate in the decision-making process. Weak party structures also make it easy for party leaders to manipulate the process and impose their candidates on members.

Poor intra-party dispute resolution mechanisms:

The lack of intra-party dispute resolution mechanisms undermines internal party democracy in Nigeria. Omotola, (2021), contended that most political parties in Nigeria do not have functional internal mechanisms for resolving disputes among members. This has led to a high level of internal conflict and litigation which often results in the fragmentation of parties and the formation of splinter groups.

The Analytics of the 2023 Presidential Election

The 2023 Presidential election went down the history of Nigerian elections as one of the most contentious in terms of the charged contestation environment in which the elections took place. The primaries of the People's Democratic Party was conducted under a peaceful atmosphere. The outcome of the primary was incontestable too. Nevertheless, the internal conflicts of zoning the Presidential slot to the south as vehemently argued by the Group of 5 Governors led by the Rivers State Governor, Nyesom Wike became the last straw that sank the PDP. This was further exacerbated by former Vice President Atiku Abubakar and the PDP's insistence to choose then Governor of Delta State, Sen. Ifeanyi Okowa as Running Mate against the alleged outcome of the 17-man Selection Committee which allegedly preferred Gov. Nyesom Wike. The G-5 which had drawn the battle line were not placated before the election and though they did not support the All-Progressives Congress (APC) candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, their cessation of support to their party largely determined the outcome of the election.

The overall analytics of the 2023 Presidential Election showed that a total of 93,469,008 million voters were registered to vote, while a total of 87,209,007 million Permanent Voter Cards (PVC's) were collected (INEC Nigeria, 2023). The results showed the following figures:

- Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the APC scored 8,794,726 votes
- Atiku Abubakar of the PDP scored 6,984,520 votes
- Peter Obi of the LP scored 6,101,533 votes
- Rabiu Musa Kwankwanso of the NNPP scored 1,496,687 votes (Al Jazeera News, March 1, 2023).

The difference between Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All-Progressives Congress and Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party is 1,810,206 votes.

The argument can be made that if the governors of Rivers, Oyo, Abia, Enugu, and Benue and their support structures were united behind their party's candidate, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, they could have won the APC candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu who won the election.

Conclusion

Considering the importance of internal party democracy in Nigeria's journey to a full-fledged democracy and the challenges faced by the PDP in recent years, this paper found that the internal dynamics and contradictions of the PDP culminated in the defeat of the party in the 2023 Presidential Election. The paper is a significant contribution to the literature in that it provides data that buttresses the import of inclusive party processes. The People's Democratic Party had all the opportunity to win the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria and could probably have won majority seats in the National Assembly if they had paid heed to the calls for adherence to internal party democracy and the conventional principles of zoning, the avoidance of which largely formed the basis for the agitation by the G-5 Governors whose withdrawal of support necessitated the failure of their Presidential bid and the loss of gubernatorial and National Assembly seats.

It is noteworthy that critical reforms are needful but more needful is the adherence to laid down rules and procedures of parties by the influential few who could make or mare the chances of their party to win elections.

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