

Democratic Regression In Nigeria: A Critical Discourse On The Character And Tendencies Of The Political Parties As Explanatory Factors.

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Abstract: Every nation at any point in time has some problems confronting it. Such problems could be political, social or economic in nature. Nigeria, as such, is being confronted with some, no doubt. Very critical and cardinal among them, particularly in the on-going Fourth Republic, is the regression in democratic practice. Indeed, prevailing observations and research findings point to the fact that proper democratic practice in Nigeria is increasingly becoming elusive. This situation has become a source of worry to proponents of democracy and good governance. For this and in realization of the centrality of political parties in democratic activities and processes, the study examined the dominant character and the prevailing tendencies of the political parties in Nigeria in an attempt to establish their relationship with the prevailing democratic regression in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. In doing this, the qualitative research method of gathering data through secondary sources was adopted. Consequently, analysis in the study was based on content analysis technique. The basic finding is that the character and tendencies of the political parties vitiate their will and capacity to play politics democratically and to encourage or promote democratic ideals among the citizenry. To reposition the political parties to actually play the role of enhancing democratic practice in Nigeria, it was cardinally recommended that political parties should embrace competition, co-operation and compromise as necessary ingredients of democratic politics and embark on political education to socialize the entire citizenry into accepting, imbibing and exhibiting democratic values in their political activities. Political parties should too be more interested in politics based on ideology and principles and for national interest and not just for selfish personal, party or ethnic gains.

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Introduction:

In the contemporary world, all nations particularly the developing ones, are striving for the enthronement of democracy and, very seriously too, for the enhancement and sustenance of its proper practice. Indeed, the democratic craze sweeping across the whole world is as a result of its immense advantages of serving as a critical framework for the expression and execution of the will of the people and for over all good governance. Nigeria embraced the craze for democracy since her independence 53 years ago. She, however, has not, all this while been lucky to realize its proper and sustainable practice (Alfa, 2011; Idala and Uhumwuangho, 2012; Ugwuanyi, 2011). Rather what she has, over the years, witnessed is democratic regression as evidenced in gross violation of basic democratic tenets as reflected in the pervasive cases of electoral fraud, irregular elections, irresponsible and unaccountable political representation among others. Extreme cases of such violations in some cases led to the truncation of democratic civilian government and the enthronement

of military rule. For instance, the military take over in January, 1966 and that of 1983 were partly as a result of gross undemocratic practices (Ogundiya and Baba, 2004).

No doubt, various institutions such as the government, the judiciary, the police, the electoral bodies and the political parties contribute, in varying measures, to the democratic regression in Nigeria. In this study, however, the focus of discourse is on the political parties and as they exist and operate in the on-going Nigeria's Fourth Republic. We feel impelled to take this focus in realization of the relationship between the character, activities and behavioural tendencies of political parties and the extent, manner and nature of democratic practice (Suileman, 2011)

In the context of the focus of the study, we shall examine and discuss the dominant character and prevailing tendencies of the political parties in the democratic process, highlight their implications on the realization of enhanced democratic practice and ultimately make recommendations for repositioning

the political parties to play expected positive roles towards enhancing the democratic practice in the on-going Fourth Republic.

Explication of the major concepts.

It is a common knowledge that most concepts and terms in the social sciences discipline are ambiguous and controversial in meaning as a result of the differing angles and perspectives from which authors and scholars define or explain them. We will attempt to remove such contradiction on the key concepts here through defining and particularly operationalizing them to capture the contextual meaning which we seek to impose on them. For this study, we explain the following two key terms thus:

1. Political party: Basically, a political party is an organized group within a country with the aim of gaining political power either alone or in co-operation or alliance with other parties (Emma, 2008). It could also mean an organization under which ambit people aspire to and acquire political power in a state (Oji, 1997). Sartori (1976) simply defined a political party as any political group indeniable by an official label that presents, at election, candidates for public office. Leed (1968), in a more elaborate form, defines political party as a group publicly organized with the aim of gaining political power so as to carry out policies which it feels will serve the national interest. In the context of this definition, political parties acquire their meaning and relevance in terms of the purpose for which they are formed which essentially and usually is better organization and management of the affairs of the state for enhanced development.

Overall, the basic criteria or features of a political party are that:

- i. It is pre-occupied in seeking the control of governmental powers either singly or in coalition with another or other parties.
- ii. Members of the party have common interest, values, ideals and aspirations
- iii. Its basic interest is the promotion of national interest.
- iv. It is organized under a recognized label or name.

Generally, without political parties, the representative model of democracy would be practically impossible. For this, in Nigeria, like in other democratic climes, political parties have become an established institution of democratic politics and as such, operates a multi-party system. As at 2011, there were 63 registered political parties that participated in the general elections of 2011. Some of these political parties are Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Action congress of Nigeria (ACN), Labour Party (LP), All Peoples Grand Alliance (APGA), All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP), Congress for

Progressive Change (CPC), Alliance for Democracy (AD), Democratic Alternative (DA), Democratic Peoples Party (DPP) etc.

2. Democracy: Democracy is a system involving institutions and processes by which leaders acquire power through popular mandate while institutions of state derive their mandate from the constitution. (Oshimole, 2005). Democracy, in essence is about the sovereignty of the power of the people and the processes and institutions through which it is delegated.

The earliest conceptualization of democracy points to the direct and full participation of the adult citizens in a polity in the decision on issues and events that effect them and their country. Such, indeed, was called direct democracy. However, in modern times such direct and full participation of people is no more very feasible and practicable as the modern societies have become very complex. Indeed, given their sheer geographical size, population and complex nature, democracy at the national or state level has become the indirect or representative type. Specifically, the indirect or representative democracy is a democracy in which people participate in taking and implementing decisions on the common affairs of the community indirectly through their representatives elected or selected for that purpose. This modern idea of democracy has made political parties very essential and inevitable in its processes as its effective functioning is built on the freedom of the citizens to choose people to govern them from the political parties.

In all, some of the basic features of democracy as identified and articulated by scholars like Nwabuzor and Mueller (1986), Dahl (1981) Wiseman (1990) include the facts that;

- there is more than one political party competing for powers in a non-violent manner.
- there are regular elections based on universal suffrage.
- elections are fairly and freely conducted.
- there is the protection of civil and political liberties.
- there is the rule of law.
- there is tolerance for opposition.
- rulers and political representatives are held accountable to the ruled by means of a variety of political arrangements.

Political parties and democratic practices: The interface:

Fundamentally, the development of political parties are linked to the emergence and growth of representative democracy (Oji and Okafor, 2000). Indeed, in modern democracies, political parties have become the traditional platform for organizing and

carrying out political activities. In reality, ofcourse, politics would be virtually impossible to conduct effectively nor would elections be possible to conduct or organize properly without political parties. This point is becoming axiomatic in view of the fact that in contemporary democratic governance, there is rapidly increasing reliance on the electoral process as the principal way of constituting and legitimizing government at both the national, state or local government levels (Alfa, 2011).

Scholars, in their various studies, have identified the importance of the party system to the practice of democracy. Katz (1986), for instance, notes that modern democracy is essentially party democracy and that political institutions and practices that are the essence of democratic government would be unthinkable without the political parties. Hilder (2003) notes too the importance of political parties in democratic governance as he observes that political parties are the main intermediary between people and power and that they, as well, organize and rationalize politics. For Tyoden (1994), no political system can be adjudged democratic without the central placement of political parties in its political process. Adele (2001) also notes the importance of political parties in a democratic governance as he argues that the political parties are the lubricant of democracy and without which democracy cannot function as they provide the only credible means of harnessing the variety of public interests and opinions that are essential for sustaining a democratic polity.

Another very fundamental importance of political parties in a democracy is that it makes government effective and responsive. This is because opposition parties functions as pressure groups and as shadow government. In this case, such pressure makes the ruling party conscious of the fact that it could be voted out and replaced in subsequent elections if it fails to perform or run government effectively. In all and as Diamon (1997: 23) notes;

Political parties remain important as essential instrument for representing political constituencies, aggregating interests, demands and preferences, recruiting and socializing new candidates for office, crafting policy alternatives, setting the policy making agenda, forming effective government and integrating groups and individuals into the democratic process.

In the specific context of Nigeria, the 1999 constitution, in recognition of the importance of political parties in democratic practice, provides in section 221 that political parties shall be the basis for any candidate to canvass for votes at any election.

The political parties in Nigeria have a plethora of roles to play in enhancing proper democratic practice. Very fundamental is the socializing of their party members and the general citizenry into imbibing and exhibiting basic democratic values. For instance, the political parties through conscious and systematic political education and mobilization could inculcate not only in their members but on the general public the following democratic values of:

- i. seeing competition and opposition as necessary ingredients of politics.
- ii. approaching the game of politics with the spirit of sportsmanship where the best have to win and the looser, at the end of the game, congratulates the winner.
- iii. being accountable to the electorates when they are voted into political office.
- iv. ensuring effective representation of the electorates and their constituencies.
- v. eschewing the sit tight mentality or syndrome.
- vi. eschewing prebendal orientation to politics and public political office.
- vii. exhibiting participant political culture by being interested and actually participating in the politics of the state and governance.

An overview of the State of Democratic Regression in Nigeria's Fourth Republic:

From the preceding discussion, the fact that the political parties plays critical and tremendous role in enhancing democratic practice is no more in doubt. However, in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (as it even was in the First, Second and Third Republics), the character, and tendencies of the political parties have not in any reasonable measure, enhanced democratic practice. Rather, they have posed serious challenges to democratic consolidation, deeping and sustenance and have resulted generally to democratic regression. These unsupportive characters and tendencies to proper democratic practice include the following:

❖ One, formation of political parties not based on distinct and sustainable ideology: Basically, an ideology is a set of ideas that constitute a political party's goals, expectations and actions. It crystallizes and communicates the widely shared beliefs, opinions and values of a party (Erikson and Tedin (2003). The issue of ideology has been central to politics, democracy and activities of political parties across time and space (Shola, 2009). Unfortunately, political parties in Nigeria lay less emphasis on organizing the society better through a given ideology (Tatalo, 2013). Rather, the emphasis is primarily and usually on ephemeral and ad-hoc arrangements that do not usually offer adequate guide and framework to run

the serious business of state governance. It appears that other forces of identity particularly ethnicity and religious have taken the place of ideology. This character, no doubt has far reaching implications for proper democratic practice. Indeed, as Umezulike (1993:181) notes;

Where the existence and operations of political parties do not rest on or are not informed by any difference in opinion or fundamental issues of principle, then their democratic values is greatly reduced.

The pervasive electoral fraud in Nigeria could, partly, be attributed to the inability of the political parties to work out sustainable ideology that will endear them to the electorates. As Oji and Okafor (2000) observe, the lack of articulate and sustainable ideology has reduced party politics and democratic practice to a bread and butter game where monetization of the political process is the bed rock of loyalty and support. This, no doubt, significantly erodes the aim and process of democratization. Ezeife (quoted in Aina, 2002) notes too that political parties in Nigeria are not ideology based and that the emphasis is on just winning election when ordinary political parties are supposed to base their political actions and election program on ideology. This situation in Nigeria is unfortunate as ideology based politics is essential in deepening democracy and in giving the electorates a clear idea as to which party or candidate to vote for in an election. Beyond this, clear and distinct ideology and manifestoes provide a clear benchmark and templates by which the performance of political parties is eventually measured by the electorates and the general public. Further, through a distinct ideology, a political party is able to proffer an alternative world view for the electorates which is very essential in deepening democracy.

Two, low institutionalization of the political parties in Nigeria: Political institutionalization basically refers to a process by which political parties become established and acquire value and enduring stability (Huntington, 1965). Although, the extent of political party institutionalization varies with party systems, it is usually measured based on some factors such as age, internal democracy, splits and mergers, electoral stability, leadership change, party coherence, factionalization (Janda, 1993). Kaura (2008) argues that the level of political party institutionalization has a direct bearing on the extent to which a political party can contribute to proper democratic practice. Unfortunately, virtually all the political parties in Nigeria's Fourth Republic have not acquired the required and necessary attributes of institutionalization (Shola, (2009); Alfa, (2011). For instance, in the case of party congruence, which according to Janda (1980), refers to the degree of

compatibility in the attitudes and behaviour of party members, the political parties in Nigeria are very low on this point as people join political parties for purposes other than national interest and service to the people. In most circumstances, people with differing orientation in life philosophy and principles, political attitudes and behaviour come together as members of one political party. This low level of party congruence explains the weakness and instability of the political parties in Nigeria. Further, there is no significant existence of internal party democracy among the political parties in Nigeria (Alfa, 2011). For instance, the scale of the participations of party members in the nomination process for candidates for general election is very low. This is because most of the political parties are extremely centralized that decision in respect of the nomination of candidates are usually made by the top party hierarchy or the "political God fathers" or political merchants who "buy" certain positions for their political godsons. The issue of automatic return tickets for PDP incumbent members in the National Assembly, State House of Assembly and for state governors for 2011 general elections is no doubt, far from reflecting internal party democratic practice. Again, on the factor of leadership stability, Nigeria political parties have so far not fared well. For instance, it is observed that among the leading political parties in Nigeria such as PDP, ACN, ANPP, CPC, and others, there are regular dissolution of party executives, suspension of party executives and stalwarts for alleged anti-party activities and the emergence of parallel executives. This, currently, is the problem in APGA, Anambra state chapter. The PDP, Enugu state chapter witnessed similar problem in 2011 as two parallel executives existed then. Then again, on the factor of factorization and defection Nigeria political parties have been characterized by high level of factionalization and defection of party members. It may not be far from the truth that there are usually not less than two factions or "line-ups" in each of the major political parties in Nigeria. Again party defection is very rampant in Nigeria and appears to have become a permanent feature of Nigeria democracy (Mba, 2011). More worrisome is that most of the cases of defection are primarily results of failure to realize one's selfish personal ambition, problems in power sharing formula and dwindling fortunes of a party (Mba, 2011). Indeed, the regularity and reasons for defections in Nigeria belittles the essence of ideology and spirit of opposition in a democracy.

Indeed, on a general note, 100% of the political parties in Nigeria could be adjudged fragile entities that are far from being described as institutionalized. This situation is not supportive of

enhance democratic practice as political parties can only meaningfully perform the necessary roles in advancing democracy if it is highly institutionalized (Shola, 2009; Saliu and Omotala, 2006)

Three, ethnic leaning of the political parties: Nigeria is a state consisting of several ethnic groups with the three major or dominant ones being Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo in the Northern, Western and Eastern parts of the country respectively. Political parties in Nigeria since her independence in 1960 have continued to be formed on the lines of the ethnic groups and for their interests. For instance, in the First Republic, Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), and Action Group (AG) and the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) emerged as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo party respectively. In the Second Republic, National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) and Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP) essentially had northern (Hausa) origin while Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) had mainly Yoruba and Ibo orientation in their activities and leaning respectively. In the Third Republic, the two political parties then, the Nigeria Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) were not so much ethnic oriented as the two political parties were formed by the then military government and political aspirants just had to join. In the Fourth Republic, however, most of the parties still assume ethnic inclination or leaning except the PDP that has, so far, assumed a national spread and ownership. The CPC, ANPP, LP, ACN and APGA among others all tend to lean ostensibly either towards the Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo ethnic group. In the circumstance of the political parties assuming ethnic spread, ownership and interest, it becomes very difficult for the political parties to co-operate in the process of democratization as the major emphasize and interest or concern in this circumstance is primarily on how to win elections and control the national resources for ethnic interest.

Four, encouragement and perpetration of electoral fraud: Ordinarily, political parties are usually of immense assistance in controlling electoral fraud by first discouraging party members from using fraudulent means to gain electoral victory. Second, by providing assistance or information for successful and conclusive prosecution of cases of electoral fraud. Contrarily, electoral fraud in Nigeria is committed with the active support and connivance of the political parties (Human Rightswatch, 2003). This explains why the political parties are usually very eager and willing to secure the realize of their party members, supporters or thugs accused of perpetrating electoral fraud. Unfortunately by this action, the political parties make their members and the general public to believe that electoral fraud is not only good but a

veritable and easiest way to win elections. This behavioural tendency has far reaching implications for the enhancement of democratic practice in Nigeria. Ijeoma (2002) in this respect notes that in the circumstance of electoral fraud, the norms, ethics, values and ethos of democracy are set aside while people are forced or deceived into supporting or voting for given political parties or candidates. In this circumstance, the beauty of democracy which lies in effective competition and opposition between or among political parties is lost. This situation becomes more critical and worrisome in consideration of the fact that democracy thrives or flourishes better in a multi or two party system. In the circumstance of intolerance to opposition as it obtains in Nigeria, a ruling party, at the national, state or local government level, would always use its power or position of incumbency to force out opposition parties from the electoral game or force them to join it. Following the experience in the general elections of 2003, 2007 and 2011 in Nigeria, opposing political parties have come to realize that it is not easy to dislodge a ruling party. Hence, the need to join it. In this circumstance, politicians versed in the art of political dialogue, constructive criticism and skillful negotiations are increasingly becoming irrelevant in Nigeria. In this circumstance, indeed, the entire objective of political pluralism becomes unrealizable.

Certainly, electoral fraud particularly as it relates to election rigging and stealing of electoral mandates harms the democratic process by, for instance, making the people to become politically apathetic, alienated and indifferent to the democratic process as they realize that their votes may not eventually count in determining who wins an election. Again, it does not, on the side of political parties inculcate in them the zeal and need to produce better policies, programs or manifestoes or to present credible candidates for election and does not, on the part of the individual politicians too help to motivate or nurture their political or democratic competences or potentials.

Five, poor representation by the elected candidates/poor governance by the ruling political party: Indeed, political parties have become inevitable in the context of representative democracy practiced in most countries of the world today (Oji, and Okafor, 2000). Further the positive relationship between democracy and good governance is globally acclaimed. This is borne out of the belief that democracy as based on the principle of the rule of law and constitutionalism is capable of ushering in good governance and societal development. Basically in a representative democracy, people elect candidates to represent them in government. The election and representation could be in the status of the president

of the country, a state governor, a local government chairman, a senator, a member of the house of representatives, a member of the state house of Assembly or a councilor in the legislative arm of the local government. The election of these representatives are invariably on the basis of political parties. The expectation of the electorates is that the elected candidates will individually represent them effectively and that the elected ruling party would provide over all good governance for them and for the entire period between elections. Such effective representation and good governance if provided by the candidates and political parties respectively re-enforce peoples interest on a democracy as a system of government. In Nigeria, however, what people have been witnessing since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999 is poor political representation and bad governance. These are re-enforced by the prevailing tendency of the political parties to concern themselves more with enhancing their corporate interest and that of their individual members at the expense of the over all good governance for national development. The implication of this for proper democratic practice is that such induces the citizens to develop feelings of apathy and cynicism towards democratic and electoral activities specifically as they begin to conceive acquisition and utilization of political offices arising from elections as not serving their interests or advancing their well being. Indeed, in Nigeria, the prevalent and common observation is that political representatives like senators, members of House of Representatives, and members of the State House of Assembly and even the local government councilors pursue primarily their selfish private interest and abandon all the pre-election commitments and promises of effective representation. Rather, they amass stupendous wealth, fly into their respective poor constituencies in private jets, drive around in posh cars and erect luxurious edifices, all to the chagrin of the poor people that elected them (Akin, 2010).

Six, undue antagonisms by the political parties against each other: It is a commonly held belief that the survival of the democratic process is directly linked to the ability of the political parties to aggregate freely, articulate and organize sentiments in the quest for acquisition and use of political power. Two, democracy is all about competition, bargaining and compromise that are expected to be facilitated by political parties. However, the contrary is the case among the political parties in Nigeria as there are usually and frequently antagonisms, conflicts and misunderstanding among them. For instance, the ruling party in Nigeria, the PDP is always critical of any move or opinion expressed by other political

parties. So also are the non-ruling or governing parties (opposition parties) reigning invectives and sometimes, unconstructive criticism on the ruling party, PDP at every available opportunity (Mohammed, 2006). Under this circumstances the political parties cannot co-operate to ensure the consolidation and sustainability of democracy in Nigeria.

Following the character and behavioural tendencies of the political parties in Nigeria as discussed above, the democratic practice in Nigeria since independence down to the Fourth Republic has continued to be characterized by regression instead of growth. This has continued to dim the hope of democratic consolidation and sustenance. The experience becomes more disturbing as 53 years is a time long enough for democratic practice in Nigeria to have become fully and properly entrenched. It is, therefore, unfortunate that the undemocratic activities of the political parties as witnessed in the First, Second and Third Republics are still being experienced today.

Recommendations:

Putting Nigeria's democratic practice on the path of growth and sustainability lies essentially on the following:

1. The political parties generally eschewing tendencies and activities that are in themselves antithetical to the proper practice of democracy. In this case, the political parties should:
 - i. allow for free and fair conduct of elections both at inter-party and intra-party levels. It is further in this direction recommended specifically that the ruling party, the PDP at the national level need to allay the fears of domination and marginalization by other parties by creating grounds for free and fair political activities and electoral conducts.
 - ii. not be engaged in politics primarily for selfish personal gains.
 - iii. promote high quality representation of the electorates and ensure general good governance
2. The political parties must have a clear and comprehensive ideology on which to operate and then attempt to achieve electoral victory through presenting good manifestoes. It is the ideology and the manifestoes that will help to sharpen, clarify, and crystallize the basis for choice of candidates or party by the voters or the electorates.
3. Politicians in Nigeria should eschew tribal or ethnic politics and should form political

parties with national spread and ownership and which philosophy and activities will be guided by national interest and the need for advancement in the nation's democratic practice. They need too, to adhere to the provision in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in section 222 paragraph (e) that the logo or symbol of political parties should not contain ethnic or religious connotation or give the appearance that the activities of the party are confined to a part of the geographical area of Nigeria.

4. For the fact that building and sustaining a democratic culture depends more on the internalized democratic values and attitudes by the citizen than on the drafting and existence of political or electoral laws, we recommend with greater emphasis, that the political parties should engage in systematic and continuous mass political education and mobilization of the people. Through this, the right political or democratic attitude could be inculcated into the citizens who would always naturally exhibit such in their political life and activities. Indeed, the performance of this function is very imperative because the whole essence of the political parties getting involved in democratization basically relates to the mobilization and conscientization of the people to accept, imbibe and exhibit democratic values and tendencies in their political activities. It is possible that through political education and sensitization, as may be provided by the political parties, the Nigerian citizens' political attitudes and values could be reformed and mobilized in the direction supportive of proper and sustainable democratic practice. Hopefully, with such a solid and entrenched democratic culture among the citizens, the nation's democratic practice could move from the state of regression to the state of growth, consolidation and sustainability.

Conclusion:

Political parties play critical roles in enhancing proper democratic practice. Contrarily, in Nigeria, the political parties make their own contribution, in more measures, in the direction that results to regression of democratic practice. Indeed, Nigeria political parties are not helping to build democracy. Rather, they are assisting in building institutionalized culture of intolerance to opposition, formation of political parties not based on a given ideology, formation of political parties based on

ethnic or religions sentiment, prebendalism, poor political representation, bad governance, electoral fraud/violence etc. For them to play meaningful roles in growing democratic practice in Nigeria, the political parties need to adopt the recommendations as made above. This we believe is possible if they realize that sacrifices need to be made to ensure the growth and proper enthronement of democracy and that when this is done, the dividends of democracy would be enjoyed by all and sundry. This is because democracy, if fully and properly entrenched, creates on its own enabling condition or framework for having good leaders, effective representation and their corollary good governance.

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