

2015 ELECTIONS: THREATENED COLLAPSE OF OPPOSITION, AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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Caveat

The All Progressives Congress (APC) administration in Nigeria is still work in progress. At the time of writing this paper the government is yet to take shape as ministers and other key federal appointments have still not been made. Beyond the campaign platform of *change* the general direction of the central government is still hazy. The APC-dominated National Assembly is yet to resolve its leadership crisis and, therefore, unable to settle down to play its constitutional role. The opposition PDP is in fits and starts. Having seemingly regained some measure of consciousness after the shock of losing the last election, the direction of the party remains unclear – largely because the government is still not fully established to allow the political dynamics of the Buhari administration to unfold. This situation defies a reliable scholastic analysis of the government-opposition power play. The title of this paper and much of the analysis presented below are based on the state of national politics between the March-April 2015 general elections and mid-July 2015. As much as possible the author has endeavoured to minimize the historian's nightmare of engaging in speculative analysis as the issues discussed are still unfolding.

Introduction

A key feature of any democratic system is the prevalence of a vibrant and responsible opposition. Since its formation in 2013 until the 2015 elections the All Progressives Congress (APC) had proved to be a strong opposition party with unyielding determination to capture power from the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Several factors accounted for the victory of APC but there can be little doubt about the role played by the strength of the party's opposition. The defeat of the PDP after sixteen years of unbroken control of federal power has generated internal crisis in the party. The crisis has been marked by recriminations, blame game and significant defections to the victorious party. Until the current APC's internal struggle for the leadership of the National Assembly in which the PDP determined the outcome, many Nigerians, including senior members of PDP, predicted the dismemberment of the PDP. Former Senate President, David Mark, for instance,

warned that the party seemed to have embarked on a course of self-destruction (*The Guardian* 07/05/2015). Apostles of democracy were beginning to worry about the potential emergence of a one-party APC-controlled Nigerian state, which is bad for democracy.

Regardless of the role of the PDP in the emergence of the current National Assembly leadership, which seems to have defied doomsday immediate post-election prognosis of the party, it is too early to predict with any measure of reliability the future of the party and the opposition in an APC-controlled Federal Government. The APC could have made a strategic blunder in handing the National Assembly leadership struggle but that single issue cannot by itself be a dependable barometer of the potential weakness of the emerging APC government or of the strength of the opposition. We need to follow the political dynamics in the days ahead to see how the situation unfolds.

Whatever the current perception of the relative strengths or weaknesses of the two parties, two fundamental issues arose out of PDP's immediate post-election crisis. First, the defections were symptomatic of lack of ideology in contemporary Nigerian politics. The second is the predominance of self-serving politics, which in recent Nigerian political lexicon, has been variously referred to as the politics of "stomach infrastructure", "chop-I chop" politics, or "turn-by-turn politics".

This paper will argue that in order to sustain a viable opposition, check self-serving politics which breeds corruption, and ensure the consolidation of Nigerian democracy, the existing laws against cross-carpeting (defections) should be strengthened and that there should be a deliberate effort to organize Nigerian politics around ideologies in order to give voters clear, issue-based electoral choices.

Opposition in a Democracy: An Overview

Fundamental to the principle and practice of liberal democracy is the issue of choice. Voters have to be given the opportunity of choosing between contending party programmes, visions and personalities, hence the notion of multi-party democracy. It is for the same reason that one-party states cannot lay claim to democracy any more than a military dictatorship or other forms of authoritarian rule, which disallow the freedom of choice. As one informed political participant has commented, there must be a constant reminder to the electorate that there is a viable alternative to the incumbent government that holds the potential of providing a better leadership. The groups that play that role are called the opposition (Bagbin, 2013). The same parliamentarian stated further that the traditional role of the opposition can be classified under three broad headings: the voice of the voiceless, alternative to the ruling government, and official opposition. A fourth role, he added, which has evolved out of the recent global political and economic realities is a critical partner in nation building (Bagbin, 2013). Such opposition can only thrive in a multi-party system. Other sources credit the opposition with the oversight responsibility of scrutinizing the operations of the

executive branch in respect of performance and accountability, especially in financial matters (www.parliamentarystrengthening.org).

The multi-party system stretches along a continuum ranging from two-party system to one of a myriad of political parties. To cite a few examples, although there have always been a number of fringe parties in the United States, only two parties are represented in the country's congress – the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. In the case of Britain with its long history of multi-party democracy, at the end of the May 2015 election, 11 parties won representation in the House of Commons, with the conservative Party under David Cameron forming the government with 331 seats, followed by Labour (232 seats). At the end of that continuum of multi-party system is India which in 2014 had 1703 registered political parties of which only 6 are classified as “recognized national parties”, that is, parties that have gained a certain legally prescribed minimum number of seats in the national parliament, the Lok Sabha. 54 of them are classified as “recognized state parties”, which have seats in the state legislatures (www.factly.in, accessed 21/06/2015).

Some governments, having come to power in a multi-party contest, proceed to do everything possible to destroy the opposition parties or deliberately keep them alive in a weakened state to sustain a false notion of democracy. Post-independence Africa was dominated by military rule and single-party states until the wave of democratization in the late 1980s and 1990s (Ake, n.d.). While Nigeria passed under military from 1966 to 1999, broken by a four-year democratic interlude under the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) from 1979 to 1983, countries such as Tanzania (under Chama Cha Mapinduzi), Kenya (KANU), Zambia (UNIP), Benin Republic, and Togo, to mention but a few, were subjected to one-party rule for decades. Robert Mugabe has been in power since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 while Cameroon's Paul Biya has been president since 1982.

For democracy to be truly so-called the opposition has to be viable, offering credible alternative policy choices to those of the government and ensuring the government lives up to the electoral promises of the ruling party. The opposition has to demonstrate that it is ready to govern if voters so decide. Until the formation of APC from the fusion of three political parties in 2013, these parties were too weak individually to pose any credible challenge to PDP control. The PDP could well have been in power “for sixty years” as a former chairman of the party once boasted.

In the British tradition “opposition” seems to be most applicable to the official parliamentary opposition. Opposition outside the parliament seems to be confined to social and civic movements and pressure groups and can best be classified as informal opposition. Such opposition can be based on the overall ideological position of the government or on specific issues. Environmental organizations, for instance, may be opposed specifically to the government's environmental policy. Green parties

which sprang up in Europe in the past thirty years are based on an environmentalist ideology. These social movements or civic organizations only become political parties when they are so registered by the appropriate authorities for the purpose of contesting for state power constitutionally.

There have always been arguments about the relative role of opposition in a parliamentary system and in a presidential system. The British parliamentary system has a place for “official opposition” and parliament is organized to reflect the demarcation between government and opposition. The sitting arrangement in the Commons in which government and opposition sit opposite each other in the parliamentary chamber reflects that demarcation. All the ministries have Shadow Ministers who could be substantive ministers in their respective ministries should the opposition win. The leading opposition party becomes the “official” opposition party and its leader becomes the Leader of the Opposition. As Ministers must be elected members of parliament, there is an organic connection between the executive and legislative arms of government.

In the presidential system where there is no such connection and the two arms exist separately, there is no “official” parliamentary or congressional opposition (www.citelighter.com/political). This raises question about the designation of non-governing parties as “opposition parties”. Unlike the parliamentary system in which the government can be toppled by political uncertainties such as the loss of majority through ministerial resignation or a “no confidence” vote and the system thrives on coalition governments, the presidential system is relatively stable. Once a government is elected in a presidential system it is difficult to topple it until the next election and there is no room for coalition government. It is a system of “winner takes all”, hence the president, who is both the head of state and head of government, tends to be more powerful in the presidential system than the prime minister, who is only the head of government in the parliamentary system.

The Multi-Party System in Nigeria

British constitutional reforms in colonial Nigeria partly facilitated the formation of political parties. As Sklar (1983:41-48) has analysed, the Clifford Constitution of 1922 which gave the Lagos colony an elective representation of three seats on the Nigerian Legislative Council was a major factor in the birth in 1923 of the first political party in Nigeria – the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). Founded by Herbert Macaulay NNDP was followed in 1934 by the the Lagos Youth Movement later christened Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM). The two parties won seats in the Nigeria Legislative Council. In the First Republic (1960-63), three dominant parties controlled national politics, each of them with its base in their respective regions of origin. These were the Northern Peoples’ Congress (with its base in the north), the NCNC (East) and the Action Group (West) (Coleman, 1958, Sklar, 1963). In the Second Republic (1979-1983) the number of major parties increased to five –

National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) and Greater Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP). In the short-lived Third Republic, only two parties were allowed – the Social Democratic Party and the Republican National Convention. This stemmed from the belief under the government of military President Ibrahim Babangida, that two party system organized along ideological lines were best for the country and that the two ideologically organized parties gave the voter clear ideologically based electoral choices. Allied to that was the assumption that the two parties should occupy ideologically moderate grounds. The SDP was supposed to be “a little to the left” and the NRC “a little to the right”. This was obviously a reflection of American centrist politics in which the Democratic Party and the Republican Party occupy ideological middle ground. By contrast the European political space reflects a more varied ideological tradition marked by left wing, centrist and right wing parties.

When the ban on party politics was lifted to herald the Fourth Republic in 1998, several political parties emerged out of which the Peoples Democratic won the 1999 presidential election. The PDP has been repeatedly returned to power in subsequent controversial elections characterized by violence and irregularities in 2003, 2007 and 2011. It became obvious to the opposition parties that given their individual strengths it would be difficult to wrestle power from the PDP. Allied to that thinking was the need for a two dominant party system – the PDP and another major party. That thinking gave birth to the All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2013, which was a fusion of the main opposition parties at the federal level - the Action Congress Party based in the West, All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and the Congress of Progressive Change (CPC), both of which had the bases in the north. The fifth party that won any state All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), was confined to Anambra State in the South-East. Altogether twenty five parties contest the 2015 elections. The rest of the parties failed to win any state or seat in the National Assembly. With the victory of APC the PDP has for now become restricted to the South-South and South-East geopolitical region, the only regional exceptions being in Ondo State and Taraba State where the party is in control.

Government and Opposition in Current Nigerian Politics

As noted, the blame game, recriminations and defections to the victorious party following the resounding defeat of the PDP in the March- April 2015 elections initially tended to give an impression of a party hovering on the brink of collapse. APC triumphalism seemed unassailable and the prospects of effective opposition seemed gloomy at best. However, developments following the attempt to constitute the leadership of the APC-dominated National Assembly have tended to make the prediction of the disintegration of the opposition to be premature. The bipartisan collaboration which produced an APC Senate President and a PDP Deputy Senate President has the potential of strengthening. Deputy Senate President Ike Ekweremadu could be a rallying point for the PDP in the National Assembly.

Although the APC has described the election of Ekweremadu as a default, it was clearly the result of a fruitful political strategising by the PDP. That the party rallied and voted en bloc for APC's Saraki and PDP's Ekweremadu thereby determining the Senate leadership does not give sufficient impression of a collapsed party. Clearly in handling the National Assembly leadership struggle, the APC made a strategic blunder which could weaken its control of the National Assembly while strengthening the PDP opposition. Saraki has denied making a deal with PDP to ensure his election while admitting regrets that having a PDP Deputy Senate President would make things difficult for him (*Sunday Vanguard* 28/6/2015). This clarification could be interpreted to mean that contrary to speculations, the outcome of the struggle for the leadership of the Senate was not a conspiracy between factions of Senate APC and PDP but rather the result of PDP's successful strategy¹.

Reacting to the internal leadership struggle that is threatening to undermine the APC, a leader of the party, Bisi Akande, has alleged that his party has been "captured by new PDP elements" in the party and special interests (*Thisday* 29/06/2015). This allegation is indicative of APC's acknowledgement of the potential challenge by PDP. By and large, in a normal political situation with 49 seats against APC's 59 seats in the Senate the PDP cannot be written off easily.

Regardless, the unfolding selection of the National Assembly leadership that seems to have strengthened the PDP in the National Assembly at the expense of APC cannot so far tell the main story of the relative strength or weakness of the government and opposition. Control of the government in Nigeria has always been endowed with tremendous power of patronage which can be used to destabilize the opposition. In a country where the politics of "stomach infrastructure" is predominant, successive governments in Nigeria had hardly been averse to the use of such weapon. Such patronage which is best expressed in unexecuted government contracts for which money has been paid, outright bribery, contact-peddling, and hefty cash gifts, sustain the extravagant lifestyle of the political class². Joseph (1987) has analysed the prevalence of this politics of patronage and graft in the Second Republic. With a combination of alleged political intimidation through the use of the law enforcement agencies, raw impunity, and political patronage the PDP was able to sustain its control of federal power for 16 years.³ Can patronage-seeking PDP

¹ The impression in the media, including this writer, has been that Saraki had negotiated a deal with the PDP to get himself elected Senate President and Ekweremadu Deputy Senate President. See Ben Naanen, "NASS Leadership and Buhari's Agenda", *The Guardian* 15/6/2015.

² The First Lady, Mrs Buhari in her address to an APC women dinner alleged that under the last PDP government contact peddlers and political gate keepers in Aso Rock charged up to 100,000 US dollars for visitors to see the President.

³ Complaints were rife in the non-PDP states about the use of the police to cause intimidation to political opponents. The matter came to a head in Rivers State in the controversy between the Commissioner of Police,

chieftains scrambling over the proverbial “national cake” mount an effective opposition to the APC machine? This hypothetical question takes for granted the expectation that the APC will be able to overcome its current birth pains in the National Assembly and demonstrate its ability as an effective political machine firmly and responsibly in control of government. Doing otherwise can only awaken a potentially slumbering PDP.

Given this prospective scenario three major constitutional measures can be employed to check the recurring tendency of self-seeking politics, impunity, and intimidation, which weaken opposition parties in Nigeria. These are the creation of state police, strengthening the constitutional provision against defection by elected representatives, and the deliberate organization of Nigerian politics along ideological lines.

The Nigerian constitution establishes a single federal police force. Opposition parties and civil society have over the years criticised the alleged manipulation of the police by federal authorities and have consequently advocated the establishment of state police. The amended 1999 constitution which President Jonathan failed to sign before leaving office, recommended state police. It is yet to be known whether the APC administration can escape this criticism of using the law enforcement agencies against the opposition⁴.

Regarding the defection of elected officials, Nigerian politics has over the years demonstrated a high degree of political prostitution. Section 109 of the 1999 constitution clearly states that any elected official who defects to another party must resign his position. But this constitutional provision is hardly respected, making party boundaries so fluid that elected representatives cross carpet at will without sanction. The PDP had sought to invoke this constitutional provision against its members in the National Assembly who defected en masse to APC in 2013, to no avail. That mass defection was the critical factor that strengthened the APC and sealed the fate of the PDP government. Disregard for the constitution apart, such defections are made easier by the fact that contemporary Nigerian politics is bereft of ideology and the parties are so similar in orientation that one loses nothing ideologically by oscillating between them. Such oscillations undermine sustainable opposition as politicians are always migrating to greener pastures.

Joseph Mbu and the state governor, Rotimi Amaechi between 2012 and 2013. Amaechi accused the security agencies in the state of taking orders from the First Lady, who was opposed to Amaechi’s administration.

⁴ Even EFCC is sometimes accused of being used for political witch-hunting.

Ideology and Contemporary Nigerian Politics

There has always been a tendency to dismiss Nigerian politics as ethnic politics. While ethnicity is clearly dominant (Nnoli, 1978), such perception does not recognize the nuanced ideological currents that have always been latent in the political parties. Nigeria's pioneer political party, Herbert Macaulay's NNDP, had its tap roots among the traditional elite of Lagos whose perceived rights in land and other privileges the party strove to protect (Sklar, 1983: 41-44). To that extent the party could be linked to some strand of conservatism. NNDP's opponent, the Nigerian Youth Movement could lay claim to being progressive for its Pan-African stance. The mainstream NCNC, founded in 1944, had a libertarian nationalist ideology but for a while sustained a revolutionary fringe occupied by the Zikist movement (Olusanya, 1966:323-333). For its progressive social policy exemplified by its free education programme radical members of the Action Group could lay claim to socialism. The Northern Peoples Congress, which had its core among the traditional elite who dominated the Native Administration in the region and supported for the status quo, has often been referred to as a conservative party.

Still in the north, the Aminu Kano-led NEPU with its professed *talakawa* tendency and opposition to the conservative stance of NPC, has often been regarded as a radical party (Coleman, 1958:364-366; Yakasai, 2012:57-102)⁵. NEPU's tradition of radicalism was carried into the Second Republic when Aminu Kano and other leaders formed the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), which won the governorship of Kano State in 1979. Although the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the Second Republic successor of Action Group made strenuous efforts to shed the toga of a Yoruba party as it was unfairly labelled by its political opponents, the party through its progressive social policy, belonged to the left of the centre. The Second Republic ruling party, NPN belonged the right as it was perceived to the northern orientation and ideological colouration of the defunct NPC. The largest of the opposition parties, the NPP, which had its base in the east and among the middle Belt Minorities in Plateau State, was largely regarded as a reincarnation of the NCNC. Just as the NEPU was allied to the NCNC, PRP was allied to the NPP under the "progressive" canopy. In the First Republic and the Second Republic then, one could identify parties of the left, and those of the right

During the last military interregnum which terminated the short-lived Second Republic at the end of 1983, General Ibrahim Babaginda, who in 1986 had overthrown the 16 month-old government of General Muhammadu Buhari, promised a transition to civilian government within the shortest possible time. Babangida proceeded to set up two official parties designed to occupy the ideological middle

⁵ Tanko Yakasai, a key member of NEPU has chronicled in his cited autobiography the repression of NEPU by NPC.

ground. The Social Democratic Party was “a little to the left” while the National Republican Convention was “a little to the right”. This was obviously to avoid ideological polarization by adopting America’s two-party centrist politics. Whatever the case voters had two modest ideological choices.

Under the Fourth Republic, the three parties that emerged in 1999, did not demonstrate any marked ideological difference. None of them could be described as leftist. The Alliance for Democracy (AD) which won most of the states in the South-West, continued in the tradition of the politics of that region which had a strong welfarist tendency. There was little ideological dichotomy between the Peoples Democratic Party and the All Peoples Party (APP), later All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), both of which could be described as right of the centre.

The political transmutation that has resulted in the current two-party system in the country has demonstrated no clear ideological identity. While the PDP has continued to sustain its right of the centre image, the APC by its emphasis on fighting corruption, combating insurgency and introducing far-reaching economic reforms, has associated itself with populism. How this populist tendency manifests can only be confirmed in the days ahead as the government settles down to the business of governance and politicking. As the name implies, the party sees itself as “progressive”. But in Nigerian politics opposition parties and liberal politicians often style themselves “progressive” to the extent that they are opposed to the party in power, which more often than not are conservative or centre-right. The only exception to this conservative dominance was the Social Democratic Party whose short existence in the still-born Third republic did not allow it to demonstrate its imposed ideological complexion. Clearly left of the centre tendencies such as labour, socialism, environmentalism, gender activism, have no constituency in contemporary Nigerian politics. The lack of clearly articulated ideological choices has made it easy for fair weather political actors to circulate between the existing parties with ease, thereby potentially weakening a dynamic opposition.

Conclusion

In this paper we have analysed the role of a viable opposition in a liberal democracy, tracing the development of multi-party democracy in the country. We have reviewed the outcome of the 2015 elections and its potential implication for the sustenance of democracy in the country. We have stated that the immediate post-election prediction of a potential collapse of the opposition appeared premature as the struggle for the National Assembly leadership in which the PDP ultimately determined the outcome does not square with the picture of a collapsed opposition. We have further argued that to have a sustainable opposition the country should adopt certain key measures to check the predominance of self-seeking politics, impunity and intimidation, which weaken opposition parties. These measures include the creation of state police, the enforcement of constitutional provisions against

defection by elected officials and the deliberate organization of Nigerian politics on ideological basis in order to give voters clear electoral choices. Our conclusion is that the government-opposition dynamics cannot be determined at the moment as the APC government is yet to get established to allow the dynamics to unfold, and that judging by current political developments, especially the leadership crisis in APC, the prospects of a viable opposition may not be as hopeless as initially anticipated.

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