

THE RISE OF THE OPPOSITION POLITICAL PARTY IN NIGERIA: CASE STUDY OF THE ALL PROGRESSIVES CONGRESS

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ABSTRACT

Right from the 1960s, both the ruling parties and the opposition parties are always at loggerheads. The opposition parties are treated with great contempt by the ruling parties and vice versa. Members of opposition parties that join forces with the ruling parties are labeled as traitors and can even be demonized. Nigeria is a heterogeneous country made up of diverse ethnic groups with Christianity and Islam as dominant religions. Additionally, Nigeria was under military dictatorship for almost thirty years at different intervals. These underlying factors seem to have affected the psyche of politicians in Nigeria. Prior to the 2015 General Elections, opposition parties have never upstaged the incumbent. The alliance of prominent political parties such as Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) and the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) into a formidable opposition called All Progressives Change (APC) marked a new era in Nigeria's democracy. The 2015 presidential polls will be the fifth in succession since the military establishment relinquished power. This paper will examine the factors that necessitated the emergence of APC as a formidable opposition party. Questions such as; Will APC become a model party in Nigeria? Will the APC tolerate opposition parties? Is Nigeria witnessing democratic consolidation with the rise of APC to power? All these questions will be the focus of this study.

Keywords: Opposition Party, Elite Theory, Elections.

Introduction

Ideally, political parties form the bedrock of a democratic system of government. Through political parties, citizens are given the choice to elect their representatives into government from the grassroots to the national level. The Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), formed by Herbert Macaulay in 1923 became the first political party to emerge in Nigeria during British colonial rule. Since 1960, Nigeria has evolved in its political development. Between 1960 and

1966, there was a parliamentary system of government in place. Nigeria's first republic (1960-1966) was cut short when the military staged a coup on January 15, 1966. Between 1966 and 1979, successive military regimes steered the nation's ship. In 1979, General Olusegun Obasanjo (retired), relinquished power to a democratically elected President in the person of Alhaji Shehu Shagari. Nigeria's second republic (1979-1983), ended abruptly when the military junta led by General Muhammadu Buhari (retired) took over the reins of power on December 31, 1983. His successor, General Ibrahim Babangida (retired), initiated the aborted third republic that collapsed due to the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election believed to have been won by business mogul, MKO Abiola. The country was engulfed in serious political instability that forced Babangida out of power on August 27, 1993. Babangida set up an Interim National Government (ING) led by Chief Ernest Shonekan. The ING barely lasted for 82 days before General Abacha seized power and ruled till his sudden death on June 8, 1998. His successor, General Abdulsalami Abubakar (retired) ushered in the fourth republic in 1999 with the election of Olusegun Obasanjo as President of Nigeria. Since 1999, Nigeria has been enjoying uninterrupted democracy. This paper will focus on opposition political parties in Nigeria right from the first republic. However, the newly elected opposition party (All Progressive Congress) will be the case study of this research.

Conceptualisation: Political Parties And Opposition Parties

Political parties

Osaghae (1982) defined political parties as “associations that serve, both as interest and pressure groups performing, the important functions of recruitment of political actors, mobilization of the citizenry and provision of choice alternatives for the populace organizing and campaigning for votes. Political party can be defined as “an organized group of people who share the same ideology and who seek to control the government in a state in order to put their ideology or programmes into practice (Chidi, 2015). In a nutshell, political parties can be considered to be the livewire of democracy, without their existence in a state, the society cannot be said to be

democratic. According to Merkl (1977) political parties are saddled with the responsibility of performing specific functions such as:

- (a). Recruitment and selection of leadership for governmental offices.
- (b). Generation of programmes and policies for government.
- (c). Co-ordination and control of governmental organs.
- (d). Social integration through satisfaction and reconciliation of group demands or the provision of common belief system or ideology.
- (e). Social Integration of individuals by mobilization of support and by socialization.

History of Opposition Parties in Nigeria:

A truly democratic system is incomplete without the existence of viable opposition parties. Opposition politics is an ideological stance taken by group of politicians whose party fails to win a convincing majority in the election (Aborishade, 2013). Opposition parties sometimes structure themselves according to a shadow government or alternative cabinet to project a coherent bundle of policies to the electorate that is distinct from that of the government. The opposition parties articulate an alternative course of action from that being implemented by the government of the day and criticize its actions when they see fit. The exercise of opposition power in the legislature is in part an advertisement to the electorate for an alternative government with its own policies and ideals that is achievable through the next elections should voters endorse it (ibid).

Various scholars have attempted to define opposition parties. Opposition parties are expected to protect the rights and interests of citizens, to monitor government performance, and to expose corruption. Additionally, opposition parties bring opportunities for representation and participation. Furthermore, opposition parties have the responsibility to stimulate debates within society over political issues and policies, thus allowing society to question the actions and choices of government.

In this sense, opposition parties are crucial for government accountability as they play an important watchdog role and act as a restraint or check on the abuse of government power (PLO, 2012).

The first party to assume the role of an opposition party was the Action Group (AG) led by Obafemi Awolowo in the first republic. The political intrigues during that era weakened the AG that held sway in the South West. Eventually, the politics of intolerance, suspicion and bitterness among the major political parties prompted the military to intervene in Nigerian politics on January 15, 1966. The successor political party to the defunct AG, Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) served as the main opposition party in the second republic.

The second republic collapsed largely due to the mismanagement of the economy, widespread corruption and massive electoral fraud witnessed during the 1983 general elections.

Two major political parties emerged as the opposition parties when Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. The Alliance for Democracy (AD) was the strongest party in South West, while the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) had strong presence in Northern Nigeria. Over the years, ANPP continued to witness internal crisis that really weakened its performance as a political party especially as an opposition to the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (Mbah, 2011). Prior to the emergence of All Progressive Congress (APC), Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) served as the most recognizable opposition party in Nigeria.

Generally, Nigeria's political parties have been plagued by suspensions and expulsions of party members, cross carpeting particularly prior to elections and deep divisions and factions that have manifested sometimes in violent conflicts (Ikelegbe, 2013). Again, intra-party violent conflicts have been particularly heightened during election periods because of the imposition of favoured and dubious consensus and the swapping of nominated candidates by party chieftains. The absence of equalitarian platforms and the subversion of the will of ordinary party members and delegates in party primaries, have grieved several party leaders and members and underlined numerous defections and cross carpeting (Ibid).

Theoretical Framework

The elite theory shall form the thrust in explaining the formation of the APC and the eventual success recorded by APC during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Two Italian sociologists, Alfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca are often associated with origin of the elite theory. In his own view, Haralambos (1999), asserted that:

- i. Elite owes its power to its internal organization and forms a united front and cohesive minority in the face of an unorganized and fragmented masses.
- ii. Major decisions which affect the society are taken by the elite, and these decisions usually reflect the interest of the elite rather than the wishes of the majority.
- iii. The mass of the population is largely controlled and manipulated by the elite, passively accepting the propaganda which justifies elite rule.
- iv. Major change in society occurs when one elite replaces another. According to Pareto, all elite tend to become decadent. They decay in quality and lose their vigour. They may become soft and ineffective with the pleasures of easy living and the privileges of power (Haralambos, cited in Ibietan and Ajayi, 2015).

Right from the pre-independence era, the political elite have dictated the political landscape of the country. In the first republic, political heavyweights such as Obafemi Awolowo, Sir Ahmadu Bello, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Tafawa Balewa, S.L. Akintola, Adelabu, J.S. Tarka, Aminu Kano and few others helped in shaping the behavioural patterns of the political parties between 1960 and 1966.

After the 1959 general elections, no party had clear majority in the Federal House of Representatives. Nigeria was practicing parliamentary system of government and there was need for the party with majority in the House to go into alliance with another political party to be able to rule successfully. Eventually, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) with NCNC acting as the junior partner (Newswatch, April 12, 2015).

The clash of the titans (Awolowo and Akintola) over the control of Western region and the inability of the NPC led government to provide good governance prompted some young military officers spearheaded by Major Chukwuemeka Nzeogwu to instigate a coup d'état that ended the first republic on January 15, 1966.

The military institution produced a new set of the political class as the country was ruled by various military regimes namely: General Aguiyi Ironsi (1966); General Gowon (1967-1975); General Murtala Muhammed (1975-1976); General Olusegun Obasanjo (1976-1979); General Muhammadu Buhari (1984-1985); General Ibrahim Babaginda (1985-1993); General Sani Abacha (1993-1998), and General Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998-1999).

The Emergence of the All Progressive Congress

For 16 years, the gigantic behemoth, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) controlled the political system of Nigeria almost unopposed due to highly monetized politics, individualistic tendencies of politicians, incoherent party ideologies, and party defection among several other factors.

On February 6, 2013, the All Progressive Congress (APC) was born when Nigeria's three biggest opposition parties; the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive (CPC), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and a faction of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), merged to form the APC (The Nation, May 29, 2015). The rise of APC was very significant because several attempts in the past to form a mega party in the country had been unsuccessful (Egwemi, 2009).

APC became more strengthened after five serving PDP governors defected to the newly formed party. Rotimi Amaechi of Rivers State, Abdulfatah Ahmed of Kwara State, Rabiu Kwankwanso of Kano State, Murtala Nyako of Adamawa State and Aliyu Wamakko of Sokoto State (The Nation, May 29, 2015). Similarly, 49 legislators defected to join the original 137 legislators in the APC. This new twist gave APC the cutting edge in the House of Representatives long before the election (Ibid). On January 29, 2014, 11 senators led by former Kwara State Governor,

Bukola Saraki decamped to APC (Ibid). Other political heavyweights such as ex- Speaker of the House of Representatives, Aminu Tambuwal (now Sokoto State Governor) and former Vice President, Atiku Abubakar joined APC.

On March 28, 2015, the presidential candidate of APC, Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (retd) defeated the incumbent president, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP with almost 2.6 million votes (The Nation, May 29, 2015). Currently, APC boasts of 22 executive governors, 64 senators and 225 members of the House of Representatives (including both the Senate President and the Speaker, House of Representatives). APC is clearly the most dominant party in Nigeria since the conclusion of the 2015 general polls.

Using the elite theory, APC won the polls because both the political elite in the north and southwestern Nigeria worked assiduously to iron out their perceived religious and cultural differences in order to build a formidable opposition party. The political elite in the north believed that the region was edged out of enjoying political power after the demise of late President Yaradua and the emergence of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan in 2011 as the elected President. Jonathan's re-election bid was perceived by northern political elites to be an attempt by a section of the country to cripple the Hausa/Fulani hegemony on Nigerian politics. Similarly, the Bolaji Ahmed Tinubu led Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) perceived President Jonathan's body language, political appointments and policies to be anti-Yoruba. Besides, the party stalwarts in ACN believed it was high time the Yoruba nation joined mainstream political climate of Nigeria. The vice presidential slot given to Prof. Yemi Osinbajo, an accomplished lawyer and scholar from Ogun state was a clear indication that southwest meant real business.

The propaganda used by the northern and southwestern elite was well received by the people from those regions who boast of the largest percentage of population spread. The emergence of Buhari as APC's presidential flag bearer, who commands a cult like followership in the north and his track records as an anti-corruption crusader and military tactician helped in polishing his image both locally and internationally. The APC campaign strategists capitalized on the failures

of Jonathan's administration in addressing the Boko Haram Insurgency; fighting corruption and salvaging the dwindling economy to sell the "CHANGE" bandwagon to the public.

The defection of some notable influential party leaders from PDP to APC validates the postulations made by elite theorists. The much publicized political feud between Dr. Jonathan as sitting President and former military ruler and civilian President, Olusegun Obasanjo gave the PDP a bad image.

Obasanjo's expulsion from PDP, his withdrawal from partisan politics and the adoption of his junior in the military, Gen. Buhari (ret'd) was seen as a paradigm shift by the majority of Nigerian elite to effect a change in the running of the country.

Conclusion

The historic 2015 general elections have been concluded in the most dramatic fashion as the main opposition party upstaged the PDP at the polls. Over the years, the Nigerian political system has been shaped by ethno-religious cleavages. Prior to the emergence of APC, various attempts have been made by different political parties to form strong alliances and coalition to seize political control from the ruling parties, albeit, with little or no success.

For the first time, the wishes of majority of Nigeria's political elite reflected the wishes of majority of the electorates. Millions of ordinary Nigerians yearned for an overhaul of the political and economic system. The opposition party, APC provided the only option for the electorates to effect change in government through the ballot system.

Since the inauguration of President Buhari on May 29, 2015, APC has been embroiled in intra party crisis over the leadership of the 8th National Assembly. The emergence of Bukola Saraki and Yakubu Dogara as the Senate President and Speaker of the House of Representatives caused uproar within the party ranks. Some powerful caucuses in APC preferred Ahmed Lawan and Femi Gbajabiamila to steer the leadership of the Senate and House of Representatives

respectively. There are allegations that big players such as Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Atiku Abubakar are battling for the soul of the party.

In conclusion, this paper argues that without the efforts of party leaders that formed APC and the political elite in Nigeria, the PDP would have won the polls and dominated the political space. APC's quest to stay in power will depend on the loyalty and faithfulness of the party's stalwarts to the interests of the party.

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