

# POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESS: A STUDY OF THE NIGERIAN FOURTH REPUBLIC

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## **Abstract**

*Of course, partism is agreeably one of the salient features of democracy, but it seems to constitute an impediment to democratization in the Nigerian political context. Nigeria had inconsistently practiced party politics alongside federalism to the detriment of the nationalistic ethnics upon which the state itself was founded. The issue now is that partism which ought to foster a virile democracy is in reality a constraint. Premised on this background, this paper examines the role of political parties in democratic process. The aim is to identify the constitutional roles political parties are expected to play in Nigerian democracy with particular reference to the ongoing fourth republic. A qualitative method that uses consultation with literature as a means of data gathering was adopted for the study. The paper x-rays the conventional roles of political parties in democracy. It argues that political parties are forerunners to democracy and for a society to practice democracy based on western philosophy, it must be fully involved in party politics. The paper observes that Nigerian politicians have reduced political parties to paper tigers thereby becoming threat to national unity. Be it as it may, the findings of this paper have similarly noted that party politics is fundamentally a part of democratic values and indeed, democracy based on western model cannot function without the existence of political parties. It therefore recommended that Nigerians must as a matter of urgency develop a new political culture towards partisan politics and Government should not place high premium on remuneration for the people going there to serve, otherwise, coming to serve will always be seen as a do or die affair.*

**Keywords:** political party, democracy, democratic process, Nigeria, fourth republic

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## **Introduction**

Although, party politics whether in the past or present has become riddled with factions, oligarchic tendencies, violence and crises, it has managed to become inevitable in a free society. Indeed, it is said that political parties are forerunner to democracy and for a society to practice democracy based on western philosophy, it must be fully involved in party politics. This practice as it is obtained in the western world is alien to African culture. But, as society is not expected to be static, party politics got introduced into Nigeria, during the transition from colonialism to self-rule. The nationalists who formed political parties then were strongly united because they were fighting a common enemy. However, the outstanding problem with party formation in Nigeria both in the colonial and post

independent era is the fact that virtually all the political parties in Nigeria are not divided strictly on ideological lines. In the study of Shola (2019) on Nigerian parties and political ideology, he argued that despite all pretenses to the contrary through their manifestoes, as much as the superficial classifications as the left and right, progressive and conservative, Nigerian parties seem to be bereft of clear ideological commitments. This lack of clear ideological division in the words of Chudi Ofodile, cited in Ojo (1998) is not itself a negative attribute, nor is it particularly a Nigerian. He affirmed that it must be seen within the context of a multi-cultural society whose diversity makes political liberalism a national political imperative. Given the diversity and pluralism of Nigeria as a polity, a certain aggregation of viewpoints and interest seems to be

unarrivable and this is at the expense of rigid ideological position. Political parties in a complex society like Nigeria therefore cannot regard themselves simply as exponents of a class interest or ideology because they are largely agencies that give effect to the compromises by which a conciliation of interest takes place. Indeed, rigid ideological learning is difficult in a plural polity like ours, but basic ideology by political parties really matters in the sense that they may impose inter-ethnic relationship since such ideology would cut across ethnic boundaries, thereby helping integrative efforts of the system. Wherever there is no such potent ideology, the tendency is for the parties to see themselves as forces competing in a multi-ethnic civil society. The question now is how has Nigerian political parties been playing the fundamental roles expected of them in a democratic system?

Party politics in Nigeria both in the past and present democratization process shows that political parties are formed and managed from ethno-religious bases. Moreover, the fact that the Nigerian masses embrace democracy is not enough to guarantee unity of interests since parties are designed towards ethno-regional and religious competition. Though there exist little changes in the formation of current political parties. With the exception of few parties like APGA, AD, LP, AA, ADC, etc. other political parties seems to be nationalistic in their postures to some extent. Thus, since the problem still linger, there is an inevitable need to resolve it and set the ship of Nigerian state on the proper channel to sail. The paper is therefore not arbitrary as it set to provide the deemed essential solution based on the research findings. Premised on this, the paper examines the role of political parties in Nigerian democracy. To realise this objective, the paper is sub-divided into six sections. Section one introduces and gives the background information. Section two reviews the works of previous scholars in the study area. Methodology and discussion of conventional roles of political parties in democracy are contained in sections three and four respectively. Section five discusses the role of political parties in Nigerian democracy while the conclusion as well as recommendations is contained in section six of the paper.

## **Literature Review**

A good number of researches have been conducted in this area, but the effort in this section of the paper is limited to a review of some of them. Therefore, the concepts of political parties and democracy were considered for a critical review in order to give the argument a solid scientific foundation.

### ***Political Parties: A Conceptual Clarification***

Just as there are numerous political parties in the world today, so also are many definitions of political parties. Each of the writers on political parties either formulates new definition or reviews those ones that have been formulated before. But an important thing to note in these definitions is that they focus on one interesting thing which is the control of government. According to Max Weber, cited in Bamgbose (2001), political party is defined as:

*An association within a political community in which membership rests on formally voluntary solicitation and adherence and which competes in periodic elections to gain control over the personnel of government.*

Defined in this posture, Max Weber makes us to believe that membership of a political party is voluntary, but not only this, in such a party system, there exist more than one political party because of his usage of the phrase competes in periodic elections. According to J. Blondel, cited in Bamgbose (2001:34), political parties are defined as “the main link between electors and their members of parliament”. In this definition, Blondel sees political parties as bridges that link electorate from different geographical locations and people of diverse cultures with their representatives who themselves have similar characteristic with electorate in terms of differences in cultures and geographical locations too. Benjamin Constant (cited in Ujo 2001) defined political party as a group of men professing the same political doctrines.

Coleman and Roseberg added more facts to their definition when they defined political parties as; associations formally organized with the explicit and declared purpose of acquiring and or maintaining legal control, either singly or in

coalition with other similar associations, over the personnel and the policy or prospective sovereign state. In an elaborate form, Coleman and Roseberg pointed to the fact that the control of government could be done by a single party in a landslide victory after the election such as the case with the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) during the Nigeria's Second Republic, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) during the 1999 general elections and the All Progressive Congress (APC) during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria's fourth Republic. Such control of the government could as well be done jointly as the case was during the Nigeria's first Republic when both Northern People's Congress (NPC) and National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) formed a coalition government and during the 2015, general elections when many political parties decided to form the All Progressive Congress in order to unseat the PDP government.

Rose (1976) cited in Olaniyi, (1998:99), defined political party as: "An organization concerned with the expression of popular preferences and contesting the control of the Chief policy making offices of government". In a similar vein Epstein (1967) cited in Olaniyi (1998: 99 – 100) argued that a party is "any group however loosely organized, seeking to elect government office holders under a given label". Appadorai in his own sees a political party as political units that has distinctive aims and opinions on leading political questions and seek to obtain the control of government. Edmond Burke, an English writer defines political party as "a body of men united for promoting the national interest on some particular principles in which they all agreed". Ohazurike (2019) sees political parties as the platforms, on which the political activities take place and are the important agencies in making democracies work. Similarly, Sartori (1976:64 cited in Ohazurike; 2019) defined political party as "any political group that present at elections, and is capable of placing through elections, candidates for public office". Summarily, Political party is an organized group of people who share similar political ideology, opinions, principles, interests and beliefs with the aim of gaining political power and governing the country. It can also be defined as an organization or institution that put forward proposed leaders that have been screened using

internal party parameters guided by their interest, goals objectives and expectation but with the major purpose of gaining control of government and coordinating the affairs of the state. The electoral commission of a country determines the political associations' that are qualified to be registered as political parties. Political associations' therefore metamorphose to political parties after undergoing a lot of specific processes.

### ***Democracy***

Democracy is the form of socio-political organization which is predicated on virtue, which most people are yearning for (i.e. justice, liberty, equality, etc). All citizens clamour for democracy while almost every nation of the world claims to be a democratic where the will of the people prevails. This assertion was also confirmed by Adu and Ibitoye (2020) when they posited that the desire of all governments to be labeled as democratic stems from the realization that real application of democratic tenets and principles to public governance helps the process of societal development. This realization according to them propels all types of government to appropriate to itself and call its system democratic. Al-Chukwuma, Chigozie and Markus (2020) also confirmed that the modern world's appreciation of people's participation in the determination of who governs the affairs of the state in their overall interests is observably the underpinning factor for the global celebration of democracy as a system of government, yet few nations are real democracies. A nation is not democratic simply because it holds elections for a President, National Assembly, Congress or parliament except if other principles of democracy are seen to be practiced. This is true of the fact that election is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for representative democracy. Representative democracy should mean responsive democracy.

Conceptually, many writers have tried to define democracy. The concept like many other concepts in political philosophy is essentially a contested one, which does not lend itself to any universally accepted definition due to the ideological, cultural and historical contextualization that underpin it. Even, an apparently concrete concept like the state virtually defiles precise, generally accepted definition also because of its essentially contested nature.

Democracy according to Mazi Mbah (2006:132-133) literally means “the rule of the people” which is said to have been derived from the Greek words of demos and cracy. The 16<sup>th</sup> American President Abraham Lincoln is reported to have given a definition of democracy closest to the Greek meaning of the concept; thus “Democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people”. By this, democracy connotes that the ultimate authority of government is vested in the common people, so that public policy is meant to conform to the will of the people. It is also said to imply both popular participation and government in the public interest, and can take a variety of forms. Al-Chukwuma, Chigozie and Markus (2020) see democracy as a concept that could be used to describe a government that is premised on the ideas of majoritarian rule and popular representation of the true interests of the public. The concept is said to have its essence in a free and open society, where individuals are free to develop themselves and those in power are kept in check by a combination of civil institutions and procedures.

Dare and Oyewole (2002), defined democracy as a system of government in which government is under the control of Citizens as a whole. For Anifowoshe and Enemu (2005), democracy was characterized by three distinguishing features, first, supreme power vested in the 'ekklesia', the assembly of all male citizens, at which each was entitled to participate by discussion and voting. Second, the system permitted freedom of speech and third, it made all political offices open to all citizens, who were chosen by ballot. The under listed were emphasized as the major features of democracy by Dare and Oyewole (2002),

- (a) There is more than one political party or individual competing for power.
- (b) The competition in elections is open, free and fair, there is no attempt to victimize anybody.
- (c) The elections come up at periodic intervals so there is no president for life “elections are usually done by secret ballot.
- (d) There is Universal Adult Suffrage in which case adult citizens have the rights to vote in elections.
- (e) There are fundamental freedoms – Civil liberties, freedom of speech, religion, association, freedom from arbitrary arrest.

The mass media; Radio, Newspapers and Television are free.

- (f) Groups and associations are able to operate, to choose their own candidates or support political parties without prosecution. Citizens can form parties and canvass for support for their programmes.
- (g) There is some separation of power and the representative assemblies have some control over the executive branch. The judiciary is free and independent of the other branches of government.
- (h) The rule of law applies and no one is above the laws.
- (i) Decisions are arrived at by majority rule. In other words, after the various interested parties to a debate have had opportunities to have their say, the final decision is based on what the majority desires. Hence we often say democracy is government by majority in which the rights of the minority are recognized, and the minority can freely campaign to become tomorrow's majority (cited in Bolaji, 2005:2-5).

From the above, it can be deduce that democracy is about people's right to have input in the running of their affairs, the responsiveness and accountability of the government to the governed and the equality of all before the law. A good democracy revolves round the above features which if any society put into practice would definitely be on her way to consolidating the system.

### ***Evolution of Party Politics in Nigeria***

Nigeria was one of the colonies of Great Britain and her political system was greatly influenced by that country for many years. By January 1st, 1900, Nigeria was declared a British protectorate (at least officially) and remained a British Colony till October 1, 1960 when she was granted independence. Between 1900 and 1922, Nigeria was administered as a non-party state. However, despite the absence of party – politics in the country during that time, the colonialists succeeded in piloting the political ship of the country without much problem. This scenario indeed, justifies the argument of some scholars who considered “party system” as being undesirable in government. The scholars argued that parties usually create divisions that are so

irreconcilable and therefore, render the government in-operative. Also, in view of the fact that political system had been existing and functioning well before the introduction of modern parties, the group concluded that political parties “are not an essential feature of political system” (Lapalombara and Wiener, 1966:22). This argument can be taken to represent the position of military government. Also, the nature of party – politics in Nigeria's first and subsequent Republics attests to this position. However, since one of the parameters used in determining how democratic a regime is, is the activities of political parties, one cannot but argue that party-politics is “desirable in government” and this explains why Sir Hume Clifford established a legislative council in Nigeria in 1922 which eventually ushered in the era of party-politics in the country. More importantly, what prompted the action of the colonialist at that material time was the intensive pressure mounted by the few educated African who felt the need for them to be actively involved in the decision making process affecting them. What also irked the nationalist agitation was the composition of the “1916” Nigerian Council which the Nationalists considered unrepresentative. The introduction of the elective principle gave birth to the first ever-political party to be founded by any group in the country. This was the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) which was formed by Herbert Macaulay and his associates in Lagos on June 23, 1923. Therefore beginning from 1922 till the time the country became independent, several parties were formed by the nationalists to press for one demand or the other.

However, before 1923, political associations that existed in the country were merely ephemeral because most of them were only spontaneous reactions to aspects of the colonial rule and they disappeared as soon as the issues were rectified. To be precise, such groups can be rightly described as “protest movement” and they had neither a consistent membership nor continuous programmes. Some of such associations included the People's Union led by Herbert Macaulay which was formed in 1908 to protest against the imposition of a “general rate” to finance the new water scheme in Lagos (Skalar, 1963:41). Other examples include Lagos

Auxiliary of the Anti-slavery and Aborigines Protection Society which was formed in 1911 to prevent the colonial government from assuming formal control of all lands in Southern Nigeria. Apart from these, various improvement associations also preceded the formation of parties in Nigeria. For instance, the Ilu Committee which was formed by Herbert Macaulay in Lagos competed for the right to advise the King of Lagos. From 1923 to date several parties have been formed in the country with the ongoing fourth republic having eighteen '18' political parties competing for the available political posts. However, they all differed in nature because what led to their formation was not the same.

### ***Functions of Political Parties***

The party system is necessary for the operation of a democratic system because of the functions which parties perform. Such functions include the following among others:

- **Nomination and Contesting Elections:** In democratic states, it is the political parties that carry out nomination of candidates and these candidates contest election under the banner of their political parties.
- Political parties educate the electorate through campaigns and rallies, which stimulate their political awareness.
- They provide platform for recruiting public office holder- president, governors, law-makers etc.
- They serve as a channel of political communication ie they provide a link between the government and citizen by acting as instruments for channeling opinion between the general population and the government.
- Political parties help to ensure political stability through the availability of a pool of the members capable of running the government at any time and also provide an effective means of changing government.

- They are actively involved in policy formulation, this they do with intrinsic reference to their manifestoes.
- In term of the political system, they have among others, the function of gate keeping and interest aggregation, filtering the demands of those they represent and shaping those demands into coherent proposals for actions by the authorities.
- Accountability: political parties outside power enable the government to become accountable to the electorate through constructive criticism of the government in power.
- Finally, political parties can be agent of change (political socialization); political parties also socialize the people politically i.e. they generate political consciousness in people about affairs of their country. This is achievable through their rallies, campaign and seminars that makes people to be more interested in political matters.

### **Methodology**

This paper is a qualitative study, designed to investigate on the role of political parties in democracy in Nigeria. It is a qualitative study that employed the use of documents data. The paper adopted thematic analysis and researcher reflexivity to analyse the qualitative data collected.

### ***Parties and their Roles under the Present Democratic Setting***

It has been highlighted in the literature review that political parties perform some conventional roles in democracy. It is thus important to examine the current political parties in Nigeria and see how far they have gone in performing these roles.

Political parties provide platform for recruiting public office holders; all the political parties presented their candidates right from local to the national levels in order to contest elections and gain political control of the state. In the just concluded February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023 general elections

for instance, APC presented Senator Bola Hammed Tinubu as its presidential candidate (who eventually won the race), PDP presented former Vice President Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, the Labour Party presented Peter Obi a former governor of Anambra state while the New Nigeria People's Party presented Mallam Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso the former governor of Kano state as their respective flag bearers. The same thing was applicable to other fourteen political parties that contested during the election. This particular role is indeed the most distinctive function that differentiates political parties from other interest group in any society.

Political education to the electorate; these include educating them on how to vote; why they should perform their civic duty and how they can press for their rights. Although, Nigerian parties educate the electorates (both before and after the elections), this they do through rally, campaign, radio and TV programs and other social media platforms but it cannot be juxtaposed with that of developed countries. This may not be unconnected with the fact that Nigeria democracy is still developing and the people are getting familiar with the practice. Many at times, political campaigns by parties and candidates in Nigeria are not issue based but centered on personalities and sentiments which usually resort to electoral violence. As it was in the previous republics, this also dominated campaigns activities in the just concluded elections. This position confirms the study of Rapheal (2018) who argued that there can be no democratic election, democratization, consolidation of democracy, growth in democratic culture or internalization of best democratic practice in any country if electoral violence is prevalent. The author further asserted that electoral violence resulting from representational campaign, balloting, ethnic and religious interest and result conflicts have been a terminal problem of Nigeria politics since the fourth republic. He submitted that election violence in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon, considering that even the 1959 independence election organized by the departing colonial authorities were characterized by various degrees of violence. What have changed over the years in his opinion are the frequency ramifications and intensity of electoral violence and these are the elements that must be carefully studied, understood and addressed in order to

improve election credibility and sustenance of democracy in Nigeria.

Link between the government and citizens; this function is performed through the organizational set up of the parties. For instance, all the parties are subdivided into; national, state; local and ward levels. The essence of this structuring is to coordinate the activities of the parties from national to the local levels which may not be easy for the government. By so doing, they act as instrument for channeling opinion between the government and the general populace. Effective performance of this function by Nigerian political parties is still in doubt because there are perceived misrepresentation of peoples' interest which accounts for lack of dividend of democracy.

Policy formulation: parties are actively involved in policy formulation with intrinsic references to their manifestoes. Political parties that were successful during elections have their representatives at the national assembly and it is assumed that the contributions of each party representative will be a reflection of the party for which he or she is representing. Also, governments at times do invite other parties to discuss on some important issues that could eventually result in its policy programme. They also perform the task of informing, criticizing, exhorting, defending or attacking government. The successful parties have been seen to be performing the task of informing, exhorting and defending the government, while the unsuccessful parties normally criticize and attack the government policies. Such is the case with APC and other political parties outside the government. Political parties provide a peacefully means of changing the government; it is a fact that Nigeria has witnessed many years of military rule but General Abdulsalam Abubakar's regime transition programme has saw to the emergence of parties whose role is to change the government via elections. However, political parties in Nigeria seem to have been reduced to tools for promoting sectionalism and opportunism rather than contributing to the building of state structures and the consolidation of development.

In terms of internal coherent and discipline, Nigerian parties seem not to have

attained a reasonable degree of institutionalization. This has no doubt reflected in their capacity to manage conflicts at both intra and inter party levels. The degree of crisis at both levels of party relations is worrisome. Political parties are observed to have not been able to hold itself together without conflict that most times threaten the very heart of the parties. These crises cut across national, subnational and even local governments' levels. The most notable illustrations can be located in the activities of some People's Democratic Party's governors (the G5) against the presidential candidate of the party; Alhaji Atiku Abubakar. The party was unable to resolve their differences to the extent that some of them were seen canvassing openly for senator Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the presidential flag bearer of the All Progressives Congress APC against their own party. In fact, the defeat of the PDP in the February 25<sup>th</sup> 2023 presidential election has been attributed in part to the anti-party behaviours of these governors. This is an aberration and a serious anti-party offence which points to the fact that political parties and politicians in Nigeria lack discipline. At the subnational level, particularly in kwara state, the crisis in APC is a reference point where a member of the state house of assembly representing Offa constituency openly criticizing the governor while still a member of the same party. Even after his defection to the Social Democratic Party SDP, he continued with his antiparty behavior by canvassing for the presidential candidate of the APC which ordinarily is antithetical to the rule of the game except if his party unanimously adopts such candidate. But in this case, it was a clear demonstration of lack of discipline which in turn serves as a threat to democratic principle and practice.

National integration: this is an important role of political parties most especially in a plural society like Nigeria. However, experience has shown that party politics in Nigeria has been ethnically and regionally based. The driven force of parties in Nigeria is said to be mostly, ethnicity, religion and money politics. The forces more than anything else, also determine to a larger extent the pattern of electoral victory of the parties. Nigerian parties at times descended to the level of being used to promote personal and sectional interests at the expense of the collective good especially

national integration and development and the consequential effect on democratic sustenance in the country. Evidence of this can be seen in the buildup to the February 25<sup>th</sup> 2023 presidential election, where religious houses and leaders openly canvassed for political parties with parties and candidates freely aligning themselves with particular religion. The effect is that Nigerian parties rather than serve as a unifying force now tend to promote disunity.

## **Conclusion**

The research work has been entitled as political parties and democratic process: a study of Nigerian fourth republic. The belief here is that democracy cannot exist without political parties or to put it baldly, political parties serve as forerunner to democracy. But how have Nigerian seen and practiced political parties? The study so far has glaringly made a distinctive revelation that party politics whether in the past or present has become riddle with fraction, oligarchical tendencies, and crisis which has managed to become inevitable in a free society. It was also revealed that the practice is alien to African culture, but as society is not expected to be static it got introduced into Nigeria during the transition from colonialism to self-rule. At that period like in other African states, there was unity among the nationalists to fight a common enemy which was the foreign domination. This struggle was fierce then to enable them take control of positions of authority. This was buttressed by the vehement agitation for Africanisation and later Nigerianisation. However, after the exit of the colonialist, ethnic consideration began to influence the electoral behavior. Party politics became polarized along regional and ethnic bases. Nigerian politicians have reduced political parties into paper tigers and thus becoming threat to national unity. Be it as it may, the findings have similarly noted that party politics is fundamentally a part of democratic values and indeed, democracy based on western model cannot function without the existence of political parties.

## **Recommendations**

Any visitor from the moon to Nigeria at this trying period will no doubt discover that Nigeria is in a serious political malaise and its political system therefore needs to be fine-tuned. It is on the basis of solving the numerous political problems confronting Nigeria that the following were recommended:

- Nigerians must as a matter of urgency develop a new political culture towards partisan politics. Contestants of different categories should contest with the intents and purposes to serve and not to corruptly enrich themselves.
- It is high time that party politics is henceforth re-defined most importantly as integrative mechanism but not as a destructive tool.
- Government should not place high premium on remuneration for the people going there to serve, otherwise, coming to serve will be seen as a do or die affair.
- Honesty should be the yardstick for political campaigns, politicians should not engage in promises they cannot fulfill as a cloak in getting to power.
- On the final note, party politics cannot exist in vacuum, for the success of party politics, we should always put our hands on deck to work relentlessly for its success and the survival of Nigeria in the defense of democracy, unity and togetherness.

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