

POLITICAL PARTIES, POLITICAL APATHY AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: CONTENDING ISSUES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

It has been highlighted in this study that Political apathy is a seemingly innocuous issue in the democratic process in Nigeria. But the political parties behave as if the problem of political apathy is non-existent in the political process. And the democratic process in this regard, trudges on as if all is well with the political and democratic systems in the country. The general objective of the study therefore is to examine the surrounding issues on political parties, political apathy and democracy in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to (i) study the extent to which the performance of Nigeria's current political parties have induced or encouraged political apathy in the Nigerian democratic process (ii) identify the contending issues on political parties, political apathy and democracy in Nigeria and (iii) make recommendations on the way forward. The study used as theoretical framework, the systems theory and adopted as methodology, logical argumentation. Indeed, findings of the study confirm that the performance of the current political parties in Nigeria have highly induced and encouraged political apathy in the democratic system. Central to the contending issues on political parties, political apathy and democracy in Nigeria is what has been identified in the study as the "we" versus "them" divide.

KEYWORDS: Political parties, political apathy, democracy, Nigeria, contending issues

INTRODUCTION

Political apathy is a seemingly innocuous issue in the democratic process of Nigeria. Nigerian political parties are also ostensibly playing critical democratic roles in the contemporary political process of Nigeria. But the political parties also behave as if the problem of political apathy is non-existent in the political process. Ugwu (2007) argues that in most developing countries of which Nigeria is one, participation in political activities by the citizens, is more or less an ordeal. This of course leads to political apathy. But the country's democratic process trudges on as if all is well with the political and democratic systems in the country. However, it is this apparent case of denial that makes the germane issues to be more challenging. The general objective of this study therefore is to examine the surrounding issues on political parties, political apathy and democracy in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to: (i) study the extent to which the

performance of Nigeria's current political parties have induced or encouraged political apathy in the Nigerian democratic process (ii) identify the contending issues on political parties, political apathy and democracy in Nigeria and (iii) make recommendations on the way forward. The theoretical framework of the study is the systems theory. The study adopts as methodology, logical argumentation.

CONCEPTUAL ELUCIDATION

Political Party

According to Okoli and Okoli (1990), cited in Okoli (2007), a political party is a formal organization, whose primary objective is to nominate candidates for election to public office, with the intention of gaining control of the personnel, policies and decision-making processes of government, in order to realize an ideal, pursue a programme of action or to achieve politically significant values. Political parties are no doubt therefore, indispensable tools or vehicles in any multi party democracy. They are the instruments through which a number of objectives and ideals are utilized (Jamo, 2005). In a democracy, political parties are the agencies by which people are aggregated for competition for state power. Parties usually start off as coalition of like-minded people whose coming together varies according to ideology, economic interest, territorial aspiration, etc (Nwokpor, 2007). Citing Abonyi (2005), Onah (2007) suggests that a political party can also be seen as an organized group of individuals, seeking to seize the power of government, in order to enjoy the benefits to be derived from such control. And as a matter of fact, this is the description of a political party, on which the political class in the Nigerian state anchor their political activities. In this study however, in addition to the foregoing, political parties are conceived as organs of interest articulation who seek power for the purpose of the implementation of these interests. Whereby these interests are mainly nationally oriented, when such a party is in power, the incidence of political apathy would be largely minimized.

Political Apathy

Critically speaking, the concept of political apathy has continued to be mistaken for the related concept of voter apathy, even from highly unexpected discursive quarters. For instance, when Holland (2014) set out to ask: Will Americans Set a New Record for Political Apathy in 2014? The entire discussion finally centered on the issue of voter apathy in the United States of America. He argues:

It's a paradox: The United States is supposed to be a beacon of democracy, yet Americans have one of the lowest levels of electoral participation in the world. In fact, a 2012 study found that the US ranked "120th of the 169 countries for which data exists on voter turnout, falling between the Dominican Republic and Benin."

Our turnout rate has been consistently declining since the 1970s.

Political apathy is the deficiency of love and devotion to a state. It is the indifference on the part of citizens of any state as regards their attitudes towards political activities such as elections, public opinions, and civic responsibilities. Political apathy is therefore absence of interest in, or concern about, socio-political life. Thus, an apathetic person lacks interest in the social and political affairs of his country. Political apathy has manifested itself in Nigeria, in the following forms: one, the decline to register as a voter; two, the refusal to vote; three, failure to protest against rigging and four, failure to assist the security agents with useful information (Yakubu, 2012).

Democracy

Democracy, posits Jaja (2005) is a concept richly set in the minds of “governors” and the governed and if strictly applied could be a translation of the kingdom of heaven to here on earth. This illustrates the level of acceptance and embrace accorded to the concept of democracy on a global scale. Democracy has thus been defined as the form of political life in which the ruling power of state is constitutionally vested not in any particular class or classes, but in the members of the state as a whole and the people exercise the power through their representatives (Ugwu, 2007). In modern times, the term, democracy has been idealized to suggest the rule of all the people themselves (Jaja, 2005). The definition of democracy has accordingly continued to defy all attempted propositions of common understanding (Idike, 2014). According to Ben-Yosef (1963), cited in Jaja (2005), there is hardly another concept more precious, yet extremely difficult to give a specific definition to, other than democracy. Thus, in Jaja (2005) we encounter the bifurcation of the types of democracy that has been practiced in Nigeria, into military and civilian democracies. Essentially, this type of conceptualization introduces conceptual confusion, as military government remains immensely an aberration from democracy.

Citing Osakwe (2011), Idike (2014) further highlights that democracy is a political system in which the people in a country are ruled through any form of government they choose to establish and that in modern democracies, supreme authority is exercised for the most part, by representatives elected by popular suffrage. Democracy therefore presupposes the participation of the people, even in its representative tendencies. Hence, its most popular conceptualization remains the Abraham Lincoln hue of, government of the people, for the people and by the people. Ugwu (2007) further posits that democracy is the most popular word and preferred political ideology today and as such every modern government claims to be democratic. Citing Aderibigbe (2001), Ugwu (2007) continues:

The essentials of democracy include – the existence of the rule of law

- Government must be responsible to the people
- Participation of the people in social, economic and political activities
- Enjoyment of fundamental rights
- Periodic free and fair elections
- Freedom of communication
- Respect for government opposition
- Existence of viable and ideologically oriented political parties
- Independence of the judiciary
- Existence of free press
- Existence of basic democratic equality among the citizens and
- Regular consultation of the citizens by their representatives.

Specifically, democracy in this study stands for a system of government by freely and fairly elected representatives of the people, in which the primary purpose of government by the representatives is the welfare of the citizens (Idike, 2014). Intricately embedded in this conceptualization therefore is the role of the political party in the enthronement of the freely and fairly elected government and in the engendering of commitment of every citizen to the continuing survival of the state.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – THE SYSTEMS THEORY

Izueke (2014) explains that systems theory was first used in the biological sciences before it was adopted by social scientists and organization theorists. Hence Batterlanffy (1951) propounded that there is a General systems theory (GST) that could be applied to general systems that exist in

nature or in a business context, organizational or economic system. Izueke (2014) further argues that almost everything in life is a system, as most things in life comprise assemblage of parts that are interdependent so as to form a complex whole. This ranges from human beings, to inanimate objects like computer systems, to social organizations, plants, universe, production and administration. Following from this proposition, Easton (1965) and Kartz and Kahn (1966) adapted system theory to political science and organizational theories respectively (Izueke, 2014). Mbah (2014) highlights that Easton was the first political scientist to systematically developed a framework on the basis of the systems approach for the study of politics instead of merely adapting it from anthropology and sociology. Easton also talked about political systems and subsystems. The political system according to him, is a system in itself. However, it consists of subsystems. These subsystems include mediating groups that are involved in the decision-making process (Mbah, 2014). Citing Hara Das and Chouldbury (1997), Mbah (2014) further highlights that the political system can be conceived as analogous to an electronic computer which processes and thereby transforms 'inputs' into 'outputs' while adjusting mechanisms, allowing for a feedback from the 'outputs' on the 'inputs' mechanism.

In this study, the Nigerian political parties are seen as critical sub-systems of the Nigerian political or democratic systems. The issue now becomes, when these political parties' inputs are transmitted to the central processing unit of the larger political system, do such inputs, in output terms translate to political apathy which detracts from the ideals of democracy?

POLITICAL PARTIES, POLITICAL APATHY AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: CONTENDING ISSUES

Defined as indifference towards politics, political apathy is an unrecognized threat that plagues all countries of the world (Tan, 2012). However, if the definition is enlarged to cover indifference towards the survival of political institutions, political apathy becomes an issue that is peculiar to emerging democracies, such as Nigeria. Central to the contending issues on political parties, political apathy and democracy in Nigeria therefore, is the occasioning "we" versus "them" divide. In this dimension, whoever that finds his or her name in the register of any of the numerous political groupings that pretend to be political parties in Nigeria, would conclude that he is not among those that their attitudes incline towards political apathy. The critical issue is this: when one's participation in partisan politics is destructive of political institutions and values, wherein lies the essence of his political participation? Ugwu (2007) argues that political parties in Nigeria are like weapons directed permanently against political opponents. He further argues:

Party leaders are like war lords reminiscent of Ancient China, who operated as "tin gods" within the party hierarchy – issuing orders, directives and instructions. Political parties in Nigeria do not have ideological focus. Once in power, they want to remain there forever, by hook or crook, brooking no challenges or criticisms, either from within or outside the party. Party members and even non-members are kept in line with deft applications of the carrot and the stick. They are harassed and hammed endlessly when they criticize the party, while the 'good boys' and 'team players' are rewarded with plum appointments, over inflated contracts, board memberships, ambassadorial positions, distributorships allocations of oil blocs, etc.

Yet, in the conventional interpretation of political apathy, the perpetrators of these political party perfidies are not guilty of political apathy!

Furthermore, it needs to be highlighted that in conceptual and empirical terms, political apathy is different from voter apathy. Indeed, voter apathy may be a manifestation of political apathy but there are also other legions of manifestations of political apathy. A broad definition of political apathy necessarily covers lack of interest in the development of an effective political system. If for instance, there is a certain political group that has succeeded in being registered as a political party in Nigeria but one cannot easily locate this ostensible political party in any functional office in Nigeria, neither have the party's candidates won election or will ever win one in any part of the country, such a so-called political party must be seen to be more politically apathetical than politically pathological. As at the third quarter of 2012, there were 63 of such so-called political parties in Nigeria (Erunke, 2012). Section 78 (7) (ii) of the Nigeria's Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) provides that political parties must fill candidates to participate in elections (Erunke, 2012). Where they fail to do so, they face the danger of deregistration. A cursory look at the 2011 general elections results showed that only eight of the 63 parties won at least a seat in the elections (Erunke, 2012). Indeed, failure to present candidates to contest elective positions is not the only sin for delisting a party. There are various sections in the Nigerian Constitution that empower INEC to deregister erring parties. For instance, Section 223(1) and (2) of the Constituency of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (As Amended) provides that a political party's composition of National Executive Committee must be broad based, cutting across various geo-political divides. Section 222(f) and (2) of the Constitution holds that parties must provide functional and verifiable offices in 2/3 of all the geo-political zones of the federation and must win at least a seat in the National or State House of Assembly before being allowed to continue to exist (Erunke, 2012). Thus, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) of Nigeria, under the leadership of Prof. Atahiru Jega had to necessarily cut down the number of the so-called political parties in the system.

However, even after pruning down the number to its current 26 (INEC, 2014) by the Independent National Commission (INEC), more than fifty percent of the existing number, hardly make any value addition to the political system in Nigeria. In the opinion of this paper therefore, such parties are guilty of political apathy. The truth is that political apathy, political inaction and lack of patriotism are closely related. Yakubu (2012) describes political apathy as the deficiency of love and devotion to a state. Indeed, every destructive political tendency is a manifestation of political apathy, to the extent that in this "we" versus "them" dichotomy, when one is directing his point-finger to others, as the culprits of political apathy, the rest of the fingers point in the accuser's direction.

Tan (2012) further argues:

The most immediate impact of political apathy on a country is a decline in political involvement, which at first may appear harmless. As involvement and interest in government and politics declines, the element of humanity is taken away from government, and politics is no longer of, by, or for the people. Without the expression of real individuals and their concerns, government stops being a living entity of the people and becomes a mindless machine. What is left is a nation at a standstill and a society abandoned.

We argue in this paper that in and out of government in Nigeria, there has been continuous decline in genuine political involvement. The people who are in government are there on selfish motives and those who are not there yet, also want to go there on selfish motives. We argue that unselfish involvement and interest in government and politics in Nigeria has continued to decline and the element of humanity is increasingly being taken away from government, consequently, democracy is no longer of, by or for the people. We argue that because of the ironical political apathy of people that were thought not to be apathetical, government is increasingly becoming a mindless machine in Nigeria and there is the imminence of a nation at a standstill and a society abandoned by its political parties. We ask: what types of political parties periodically go for elections without manifestoes. Our guess is that they are political parties that manifest political apathy!

The fact remains that political parties in the present democratic dispensation in Nigeria have not given to the Nigerian political system, strong party men whose antecedents as party men have brought them into leadership positions in government, at such a level that their subsequent performance in government would engage the attention of the citizens, whom in this regard would not develop political apathy tendencies. The political parties have rather brought into government, so many men and women of doubtful integrity who became guilty of corruption and their cases helped in accentuating the political apathy scenario in the country. A system that breeds corruption is equally likely to breed political apathy. Nwokpor (2007) argues that whatever their antecedents, political parties generally help to organize, mobilize, educate, sensitize and encourage people to participate in politics. Hence, the issue of political apathy in any political system borders on the role of political parties and the quality of their input into the particular system.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE WAY FORWARD

It is recommended in this study that the number of political parties in the practice of democracy in Nigeria should further be pruned down to such a number that would not encourage political apathy. Strictly speaking, when the citizens cannot remember the names of the political parties that are ostensible participants in their country's democratic process, it engenders political apathy. As a matter of fact, it is not the opportunity to pretend to participate that fights apathy; it is rather the coming together of patriotic citizens in a reasonable number of strong political parties. We opine that the political system in Nigeria does not require more than a dozen political parties and thus recommend that the INEC of Nigeria continues to find a way of pruning down the number of parties, in order to weed out the pretender-political parties. With a moderate number of political parties, the manifestoes of the parties would become clearer to the citizens, the parties' supporters will increase in number and political apathy would be reduced in the system.

We further recommend that political parties in Nigeria should be made to begin to circulate to the citizens, the manifestoes of their parties. Indeed, we are of the opinion in this study that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should subject every registered political party in Nigeria to periodically submit millions of copies of their manifestoes to the INEC for circulation as the Commission deems fit, to Nigerian citizens. Based on projections from the 2006 census that put the nation's population at 140 million citizens (Ndujihe, 2013) Nigeria's current population estimates is in the region of 170 million people. It will go a long way in reducing political apathy in the system; if the political parties that want to be in power at the central level of governance in Nigeria, are statutorily made to make a few million copies of their

manifestoes get into the hands of Nigerian citizens. As argued by Jamo (2005), democracy as understood and practiced in the western perspective is impossible without the effectiveness of political parties. Generally, he argues, political parties the world over or in any democracy constitute what one may refer to as “market of ideas” where the electorate as “buyers” were expected to make informed choice of what they buy. The “commodity” advertized for sale in that “market” by the parties were the electoral promises most often contained in their manifestoes, party policies and other campaign promises. That is why in advanced democracies, political parties were basically ideologically rooted, thereby giving the voters the option of choosing between contending political perspectives, philosophies and ideologies. Regrettably, Nigerian political parties are not so ideologically oriented (Jamo, 2005). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), we recommend, must begin to compel the parties to be ideologically oriented!

We recommend for Nigerian political parties, a system whereby only men and women who have been tried and trained, tested and trusted as political party democrats and mobilizers of impeccable pedigree (of men and resources) are presented for elective positions. These men and women would have served as local, state or national Organizing Secretaries, Publicity Secretaries, Convention Keynote Speakers, Convention Planning Committee Leaders, Party Chairmen and Secretaries, Treasurers, etc; for some number of years, before their parties would present them to the general political system for elective positions. In other words, the quality of input in terms of the credibility of the candidates presented by the political parties contributes to the prevalence or otherwise of political apathy in the larger political and democratic system. With such men of credibility in power, the incidence of political apathy is likely to be reduced. Indeed, when the political parties introduce strange leaders to the general political system, it induces political apathy, especially in instances where the manifesto of neither the party nor their strange candidate is known to the skeptical citizens.

CONCLUSION

The central contention in this paper is that we have had in Nigeria, a case of deepening political apathy which has been masqueraded as political participation, simply because some truly few members of the registered political parties, periodically claim to be selecting and presenting candidates for what in their own views, amount to general elections. When therefore we want to talk about political apathy which is generic, we end up discussing voter apathy which is only a subset of the general issues. In the process, democracy remains falsified in Nigeria and this remains an indictment on the political parties, as indispensable pillars of democracy. In order to authenticate democracy in Nigeria therefore, the political parties must of necessity begin to provide for the citizens, credible avenues of political participation and present to the electorate, credible candidates of impeccable pedigree, not political party opportunists. The availability of such input from the political parties would invariably minimize the chances of apathy occurrence in the Nigerian polity.

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