INTERNAL PARTY DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This study examined the problems and prospects of internal party democracy as it affect democratic consolidation in Nigeria. At the heart of this study is the conviction that democratic consolidation is heavily dependent upon vibrant and well-functioning political parties. Without the existence of political parties as one of the indicators of democratic consolidation, a political system cannot be classified as democratic. The study argues that sustained poor political leadership among others has seriously threatened the survival of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The overall finding is that the degree of internal democracy of political parties in Nigeria is weak, due to the electoral parties’ weak organizations, party leadership; intra-party conflicts and lack of intra-party democracy; poor relations between political parties-mutual suspicion and conflict; policy/programme development; and the management and administration of the internal affairs of the party. The study suggests that it is imperative to revived political parties democracy through several means as was recommended in this study.

Keywords: Political Party, Internal Party Democracy, Democratic Consolidation

Introduction

Achieving a democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires good governance by democratic regimes through internal party democracy. It also demands upholding democratic values of popular participation, respect for the rule of law, free and fair elections and the independence of the judiciary. Based on the above scenario, political parties in particular constitute a weak link between the state and the society. The central role played by political parties in the development and nurturing of a virile democracy and its consolidation cannot be overstated. Where democracy survives for a long period of time, it is because political parties, among other vital institutions, are well established, and have played the role expected of them. The ability of political parties to attain this feat is the function of how effectively and excellently they are financed, organized, structured and run on the basis of openness and internal democracy (Ajibola, O. Peter Adu, 2016). According to him, other key elements in the flourishing of virile political parties are transparency, accountability, sound ideology, independence, and high level of organizational and administrative structures. Thus, the institutionalization of political parties and the degree to which they are deeply embedded in a political system constitute the beacon of hope that democracy should sail towards consolidation.

The emergence of modern societies rehabilitated the atomized individuals into political parties with the primary responsibility of capturing and running democratic government. Thus, the survival of democracy in modern society rests partly on the ability of political parties to recruit people into party and elective offices, aggregate and articulate interests,
politically educate, socialize and integrate the people (Montero and Gunther 2003 and Ujo 2009). Research has shown that most Nigerians believed that internal party democracy does not only affect the credibility of the elections, but also the quality of leadership, governance and economic development. Moreover, according to Sartori and Duverger (cited in Okhaide 2012) stressed that internal party democracy is very important for the functioning of the democratic system as a whole.

According to Randall and Svasand (1999), the relationship between parties and democratic governance to a greater extent determines the viability of representative democracy, and that the survival of modern democracies is unthinkable without the existence of political parties. In Nigeria, the return to democracy since 1999 has ushered in a renewed process of democratization and, thus, heralded another opportunity for the country to launch a new strategy towards democracy, after many years of lost opportunities under a prolonged period of military authoritarian rule.

However, there is growing evidence of declined public confidence in parties the world over; political parties have deteriorated in membership, organization, and popular involvement and commitment to democratic ideal. The Nigeria situation is not an exception. Since the Nigerian State returned to democratic governance in 1999, party activities especially in the areas of selection, election, accountability, discipline, etc appear to be far below democratic requirements such that Nigeria democratic project has been the subject of intense debate in many quarters (Obah-Akpowogha 2013). for instance, political parties were neck-dipped into all manners of antidemocratic activities including: electoral manipulations during primary and secondary elections, thuggering, hooliganism and vandalism during elections, party cross-carpeting, political assassination of political opponents, arising from unfair method of selecting party’s flag bearers and generally lack of party’s internal democracy (Dike 2003). It was further stressed that logic of party competition rather than internal party democracy is the element that makes democracy functioning. In Nigerian, there seem to be total disregard for internal party democracy among the registered political parties particularly as it relates to the conducts of parties primaries election.

Internal party democracy is part and parcel of democratic consolidation in Nigeria; however, it has continued to be played along a dangerous path even to the point of constituting a threat to the democratic consolidation. Even at the state level, the situation is not in any way different and is at times worse than what obtains at the national level. This is because, inter-party relations in some states often take the form of violent confrontations among party faithful, leading to the destruction of lives and property of citizens. These situations are unhealthy in a context where political parties are expected to assist in integrating a fragmented society, engender political communication and be in the vanguard for the realization of the much-desired dividends of democracy by the citizens. It is in view of the foregoing that this study intends to examine internal party democracy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria; its problems and prospects.

The Development of Party Politics in Nigeria

History of political parties in Nigeria will never be complete if mention is not made of the various political bigwigs in the history of this country. Aside discussing the political parties in Nigeria, this study will equally discuss about the political history of Nigeria. The first set of political parties to be formed in Nigeria was formed in 1959, shortly before Nigeria gained her independence from Britain. The three political parties were the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). This party was led by Nnamdi Azikiwe. The second political party was the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) and it was led by Ahmadu Bello. The party was majorly populated by the Hausa-Fulani from the North. The third one was the Action Group and it was led by Obafemi Awolowo. The party was mainly populated by the Yorubas from the southwestern part of Nigeria. During the 1959 elections, no single party was able to win the majority. The NPC then decided to combine with the NCNC to form the national government. This brought Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in as Prime Minister and Nnamdi Azikiwe as the Governor-General on independence in 1960.

Nnamdi Azikiwe became the president of Nigeria in 1963 after Nigeria became a republic, while Tafawa Balewa maintained his position as the Prime Minister. The census conducted in 1963 was thought to favour the Hausa-Fulani more than the rest of Nigeria and this dissatisfied the Igbos, leading to the splitting of the NCNC with the NPC. The NCNC then joined with a faction of the AG. This group was led by Obafemi Awolowo and they formed a new political party named United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA). The NPC on the other hand joined with the remaining faction of the AG led by Akintola to form yet another political party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). The Nigeria Civil War came in 1967 and ended in January 1970. This was followed by a coup de et, which led to the removal of General Gowon in 1975 and the assumption of General Murtala Mohammed to the position of president. Murtala Mohamed was killed in an
unsuccessful Buka Dimka coup de ta in February 1976 and Olusegun Obasanjo took over from him. General Obasanjo handed over power to Shehu Shagari, in 1979. Many thought Shehu Shagari did not win the election. He re-contested after his first time and also won in an election many thought was rigged against Obafemi Awolowo.

Another coup took place on December 31, 1983, which brought in Muhammadu Buhari as president. Yet another coup took place on August 2, 1985 and Ibrahim Babangida took over as president. Babangida made new constitution and planned returning the country to civilian rule. Elections actually held in 1993 between Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Party (NRP). Moshood Abiola of the SDP won the election that was touted as the fairest and freest election ever conducted in Nigeria. Nigeria finally returned to civilian rule after another 6 years of military rule and General Obasanjo came to power under the People’s Democratic Party on May 29, 1999. He handed over to late Umar Musa Yar’Adua of the same political party after defeating the oppositions Action Congress (AC) and Congress for Progressive Change (CPC). The AC won most of the states in the Southwest, while the CPC won most of the states in the Northern part of the country. The PDP swill won the majority despite this strong show of opposition. Yet another political party, the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) participated in the election but was only able to win a couple of states in the south eastern part of the country.

However, Umaru Musa Yar’Adua could not complete his first term in office. His vice, Good luck Jonathan took over and he was sworn in a second time in 2011 after winning convincingly at the polls. Things went down the hill for Jonathan and he lost his popularity in many parts of the country, except in the southeastern and south-southern parts of the country. This led to the near-breakup of the PDP due to the exit of many of the political bigwigs of the party to the opposition parties.

They named their newly formed political party as All progressive Congress (APC). This political party presented the former military president, Muhammadu Buhari, as flag bearer after he defeated Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso and Atiku Abubakar in the primaries. The exodus of many members from the PDP to other political parties, especially the APC, led to the shake in the stronghold of the then ruling party. Some aggrieved PDP governors formed a faction of the political party and called it the nPDP. The nPDP were made up of 7 state governors; 5 of them later defected to the newly formed APC. To make things worse for the PDP, some of its leaders started exiting the party and joining their lot with the new APC. Notable among them is Olusegun Obasanjo, who many saw as the main force behind the PDP. Trouble started brewing when Obasanjo resigned as the chairman of the PDP’s Board of Trustees (BOT). Inability of the then president, Goodluck Jonathan to settle the rift led to the outright defection of Obasanjo to the APC. At that point, many concluded that Jonathan would end up being defeated at the polls. Muhammadu Buhari of the APC was able to defeat the Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP at the polls and Muhamadu Buhari was sworn in as President on May 29, 2015. The APC is presently the ruling party, while the PDP is the main opposition party.

Other political parties that participated in the 2015 general elections aside the APC and PDP were the Labour Party, the National Conscience Party, the Hope Democratic Party, the United Progressive Party. The Allied Congress Party of Nigeria, the United Democratic Party, the All Progressive Grand Alliance, the African Democratic Congress, the Kowa Party, the Alliance for Democracy and the Action Alliance. Among all of them, only the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) could boast of winning election.

Internal Party Democracy

Political party generally refers to an organization that mobilizes voters on behalf of a common set of interests or ideologies. According to Nwankwo (2006), political parties play an important role in political life by setting policy agendas, nominating candidates for public office, monitoring the work of elected representatives and organizing and directing human and material resources towards a common goal. However, Inge Amundsen (2016) argued that internally democratic parties will select more capable and appealing leaders, formulate more responsive policies, and thus gain a greater number of victories at elections. On a more theoretic and normative level it is argued that democratic internal party procedures will strengthen the overall democratic culture. Internal party democracy has an ‘apparent potential to promote a “virtuous circle” linking ordinary citizens to government, benefiting the parties that adopt it, and more generally contributing to the stability and legitimacy of the democracies in which these parties compete for power’ (Scarrow, 2005).
However, state regulation on internal party organization, internal party democracy and leadership selection remains very weak in Nigeria. In the real world, internal party democracy ranges from the most centralized political parties, where the party chairman has the final say, to the most decentralized political parties, where the national party organization only has a coordinating role. Within this continuum, three areas of decision-making are identified, on which it is possible to measure the degree of internal party democracy: leadership and candidate selection (or election), policy selection and formulation, and coalition formation (Croissant and Chambers, 2010; see also Scarrow, 2005).

The Political Party and Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation is the process by which a new democracy matures, such that it is unlikely to revert to authoritarianism. It also assumes two things, the first being that there is already in existence a state of democracy characterized by all democratic features via periodic election, security of life and property, fundamental human rights and freedom, constitutional stability as a fulcrum of society and governmental stability and also opportunities for equality, justice and fair play. On the other hand, it assumes that there is a need to consolidate the base of the existing democracy. This implies making firmer, more solid and more resilient the base of the existing democracy (Obah-Akopowoghaha 2013).

However, in a society where democratic consolidation is apace, political parties play an important role of creating a relationship between government and the citizenry. The relationship is fostered by the support given to the parties by the people in exchange for information from the parties about the government. In other words, a vital stage in the process of democratic consolidation is the involvement of the masses through socialization and the recruitment of capable hands into the political system anchored on a systematic procedures and policies for selecting individuals.

However, for party politics is the totality of actions and inactions exercise by political parties in a state. However, democratic consolidation is a function of part politics. In other words, the growth of democracy in a country is as a result of conducive environment created by the interaction of political parties in a state. A negative interaction where actors (political parties) breach the code of conduct the in system or electoral process and undermining the constitution of the state, this will impact negatively on deepening democracy. Conversely, positive interactions of political parties both inter/intra parties’ activities will signal a geometrical growth on democracy. Democracy is a concept that revolves around and about the will of the people where the minority rights are properly ensured. A negative interaction of party politics describes politics without the people and is an enthronement of autocracy. Moreover, the ultimate goal of election itself is to measure, assess, articulate and integrate the needs of the electorates. Election is an avenue where by eligible voters and candidates make their will know. Once this process is interrupted by some class, then what exist is just artificial politics devoid of the general will.

Problems of Internal Party Democracy towards Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

In brief, the challenges facing political parties in Nigeria revolve primarily around the following:

1. party leadership;
2. intra-party conflicts and lack of intra-party democracy;
3. poor relations between political parties-mutual suspicion and conflict;
4. policy/programme development; and
5. The management and administration of the internal affairs of the party.

Leadership

Undoubtedly, the effectiveness and vibrancy of any political party in respect of its contribution to a functioning democracy depends heavily upon its leadership. Thus, a party’s performance during and in between general and local government elections is determined, among other things, by how visionary its leadership is. A party can rise or fall on the basis of the nature of its leadership cadre. In Nigeria the leadership issue still remains problematic, among other things, the challenges facing parties in electing/selecting their leadership; their internal structures, hierarchy and accountability mechanisms; ethical codes of conduct for both the leadership and the party rank and file; programme/policy development; international and regional networking among parties; the formation of national coalitions among parties; party relations with the civil society organizations; and parties’ communications strategies crossly affect democratic consolidation.
However, political parties face daunting challenges in institutionalizing accountable, transparent and visionary leadership that is capable of inculcating a democratic culture and practice both within the party and in the nation at large. In other words, democracy at both the macro level of the nation and the micro level of the parties requires democrats, and it is thus imperative that party leaderships embrace a democratic culture and practice.

**Intra-party conflict and lack of intra-party democracy**

Intra-party conflicts are a generalized trend in Nigeria. These conflicts may be covert or overt, violent or non-violent, prolonged or short-lived depending on the specific political context of each country. Some of the adverse effects of the infighting within parties are the all-pervasive phenomenon of party splits, the proliferation of parties and the prevalent trend in many countries today towards the appearance of independent candidates. Intra-party conflicts, especially violent ones, are a result of a lack of intra-party democracy. If dissent is prohibited within parties, members may find themselves resorting to unconstitutional means of expressing their dissatisfaction about the way parties are governed. Conflict within parties may be prolonged and protracted or may intensify around election time in relation to the selection of party leaders and the nomination of election candidates.

The challenges that confront political parties in terms of entrenching intra-party democracy are many and varied. Primary elections are an important litmus test of the extent and degree of democracy within political parties. Often, the process of nominating party candidates for purposes of contestation of state power during elections tends to be fraught with controversy and conflict as a result of the way in which it is carried out by the party leadership.

**Poor relations between political parties**

Political parties are not good at relating to each other and developing mutually beneficial pacts at the national level premised upon a common ideology and policy frameworks. At the national level, while the relationships between the ruling party and opposition parties often tend to be marked by mutual suspicion at best and outright hatred at worst, opposition parties themselves hardly ever relate to each other in a harmonious way. We hardly ever hear of regular national dialogue between ruling parties and opposition parties both during and in between elections. Leaders of ruling parties are known for refusing to engage opposition party leaders in national policy issues. More glaringly, some leaders of political parties would even refuse to hold national debates during election campaign, this was the case of 2015 presidential election in Nigeria where president Muhammadu Buhari refuses to have national debate during election campaign. Political parties in Nigeria have a poor track record in establishing and sustaining harmonious inter-party relations.

**Policy and programme development**

Policy and programme development determines the effectiveness of parties, especially when it comes to the mobilization of a support base and contestation for state power. We found that parties experience difficulties in developing policies and programmes. It has been observed that political parties in Nigeria tend to lack ideological clarity and distinctiveness. As a result, they look much the same to each other and they tend to raise similar campaign issues. Their programmes often lack policy substance and are generally a shopping list of promises which are hardly ever fulfilled after elections.

Election campaigns tend to revolve around individuals rather than being predicated upon well-defined and ideologically delineated policy positions/proposals. Consequently, even voters choose parties and candidates not so much on the basis of their policy proposals as on the basis of the personalities involved, patronage politics and ethnic/tribal/racial affinities. This trend further fuels political corruption within political parties, which becomes even more rampant during elections. The challenge here is for parties in Nigeria to become ideologically differentiated and be in a position to present clearly differentiated policy proposals as they campaign for elections so that the electorate can choose their candidates on the basis of policies as opposed to individuals and other considerations, such as patronage, identity politics and so on.

**The management of internal party affairs**

The management of parties’ internal affairs is an important yardstick for the extent to which internal party democracy is deepening in Nigeria. In one sense this issue is inextricably linked to that of party leadership, but it is also dependent upon the ideological clarity and distinctiveness of each party, as well as the relevance of its manifesto and programme. The
management of internal party affairs involves their day-to-day running, the building of national, provincial, district, community and village branches of parties, and the management of party resources, both movable and immovable. It also includes the development of manifestos and programmes as well as the organization of regular meetings and conferences. In those countries where the leadership of the political parties is rather autocratic, clearly, the management of parties tends to be less transparent and accountable to the party rank and file. In those countries where the leadership is more open and fairly democratic, the management of parties tends to be more transparent and accountable. It is imperative, therefore, that parties strive for efficient, transparent and accountable management of party affairs if intra-party democracy is to be established and institutionalized. Furthermore, effective and efficient management systems have to be put in place from the village/community branches up to the national structures of parties if their management is to be adequately improved.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has examined all the factors militating against the internal party democracy in Nigeria. It has also shown the role internal party democracy plays in achieving democratic consolidation. The study discovered that, while democratization in Nigeria is unfairly at the macro and micro level of the nation state, internal democracy within parties remains a major challenge. In other words, Nigerian state have made considerable strides in advancing democracy, while the key actors in the democracy process “political Parties” have lagged behind in inculcating an internal democratic ethos, practices and procedures. This, in part, explains the declining public trust in political parties in Nigeria. This declining public trust could also be linked to the nature of (external) environment political parties find themselves operating in.

Despite these challenges facing political parties, they remain a critical pillar for democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Where parties do not exist, democracy is well-nigh impossible. Thus, in order to ensure the effectiveness of parties, the external and internal challenges will need to be addressed by governments and parties themselves. In order for Nigeria to achieve an acceptable level of internal party democracy, the following recommendations are suggested. Firstly, Party laws and regulations need to be stringently enforced, and breaches of those laws and regulations need to be met with appropriate sanctions. It is evident that in Nigeria these laws and regulations either do not exist or are not stringently enforced in order to bring parties into line. Consequently, parties depend primarily on their constitutions and internal regulations. Secondly, management of the internal affairs of political parties should be steered in such a way as to redress the bureaucratic-oligarchic syndrome marked by the triple burden of (a) hyper-bureaucratization, (b) the personality cult and (c) patronage politics. To redress this trend will require serious efforts aimed at institutionalizing internal democracy within the political parties.

Thirdly, Parties need to open up to their rank and file membership for the collective ownership of nominations and party lists. In fact, it is desirable for an independent and impartial body to be engaged and involved during party nomination processes and the drawing up of party lists. This would ensure that the process is monitored and observed by an external impartial body. Fourthly, effective and efficient management systems have to be put in place from the village/community branches up to the national structures of parties if their management is to be adequately improved.

Reference


