POLITICAL PARTIES AND ETHNIC POLITICS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
This paper which is exploratory in nature examines the place of political parties and ethnic politics. It contends that Political parties usually play crucial role in the democratic process; this is because they formulate political and policy agendas, select candidates, conduct election campaigns and monitor the work of their elected representatives. The paper further points out that political parties especially in Africa are often times created along ethnic lines and this is a direct fall out of ethnic nationalism which arises because of lack of internal cohesion among ethnic groups of African states. It is basically because people seem to owe greater allegiance to their ethnic nationalities than to the state for varying reasons that situations like that occur and this mostly manifests itself as internal fragmentation through ethnic agitations that end up in militancy. It is the view of paper that though there are ethnic groups in Africa and Nigeria in particular, it is not a trajectory for national devolution or fragmentation in a multicultural, complex, plural or what the West may want to call ‘divided states’ and as such should not be seen as obfuscating. The paper concludes that ethnicity should not be allowed to sentence African states to pernicious and precarious situations and circumstances, rather, political parties can galvanize the ethnic groups through their manifestoes such that it brings about material prosperity, democracy and good governance which can become an element or subject of integration as opposed to divisiveness.

Introduction
This work is presented in two broad sections to cover the major elements under review, namely, political parties and ethnic politics. The third is the concluding section.

1.1 Political Parties
Political Parties are basically those organizations that mobilize voters on behalf of a common set of interests, concerns, and goals. Political parties usually play crucial role in the democratic process, this is because they formulate political and policy agendas, select candidates, conduct election campaigns and monitor the work of their elected representatives. Political parties link citizens to the government and vice versa thus providing a means by which people can have a voice in their own affairs through governance.
Thus, a political party is an organized group of individuals who share similar political beliefs, opinions, principles, aspirations and interests with the sole aim of capturing political power and exercising it through the formation of government. In democracies, according to Nnoli (1998), a political party is a more or less permanent institution with the goal of aggregating interests, presenting candidates for elections with the purpose of controlling governments and representing such interests in government. It is thus a major vehicle for enhancing participation in governance.

Furthermore, Badmus (2006) asserts that political parties are saddled with the responsibility of recruiting competent individuals for political leadership through periodic elections, educating the electorate through political rallies and dissemination of information about government policies as well as serving as a vehicle for the articulation and aggregation of the interests of people. Thus, they serve as the pivot upon which the entire political process revolves.

Political parties are of varying types or kinds such as cell party, branch party, caucus party etc which we will not discuss though. However, Ofoeze (2001), Lawson (2009) among several other authors opine that a political party system consists of all the parties in a particular state and the laws and customs that govern their behaviour. They identified several party systems and concluded that three of these party systems are prevalent namely;

1) Multiparty systems  
2) Two-party systems, and  
3) One-party systems

It should be pointed out that multiparty systems are the most common type of party system. According to Lawson (2009) parliamentary governments based on proportional representation often develop multiparty systems. In this type of electoral arrangement, the number of legislative seats held by any party depends on the proportion of votes they received in the most recent election. When no party gains a majority of the legislative seats in a parliamentary multiparty system, several parties may join forces to form a coalition government. Advocates of multiparty systems point out that they permit more points of view to be represented in government and often provide stable, enduring systems of government, as in most of contemporary Western Europe.

In a two-party system, control of government power shifts between two dominant parties. Two-party systems most frequently develop when electoral victory requires only a simple plurality vote, that is, the winner gets the most votes, but not necessarily a majority of votes. In such a system, it makes sense for smaller parties to combine into larger ones or to drop out altogether. Parliamentary governments in which the legislators are elected by plurality voting to represent distinct districts may develop party systems in which only two parties hold significant numbers of seats such as in Britain and Canada. Advocates of two-party systems believe they limit the dangers of excessive fragmentation and government stalemate.

However, in the United States, which separates the powers and functions of government between the arms or branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial), it is possible for one party to control the legislature and the other to control the executive branch. This frequently has
led to political gridlock between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Typical of this sort of gridlock is the one that nearly shut down the government a few months ago. Opponents of the two-party system believe that in time the two parties increasingly tend to resemble each other and leave too many points of view out of the political process resulting into what has come to be known in the United States political lexicon as bi-partisanship.

A single-party system on the other hand according to Ofoeze (2001), Nwankwo (2008), Lewis (2009) is one in which one party nominates all candidates for office. Thus there is no competition or opposition for elected offices. The only choices left to voters are
(1) To decide whether or not to vote and
(2) To vote ‘yes’ or ‘no’ for the designated candidate.

Single-party systems have characterized Communist Party governments and other authoritarian regimes. They have however; become much less common since Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) at the start of the 1990s. Nevertheless, surviving Communist states, notably China, North Korea, and Cuba, have continued to enforce the rule of a single party. International financial pressure has also reduced the number of single-party systems in developing nations. Funding and donor agencies such as the World Bank often insist upon a competitive party system as a precondition for granting loans or aid to these countries. At any rate, protagonists of single-party systems are quick to point out that they provide a way for nations to mobilize and direct the talents and energies of every citizen toward a unified mission or purpose. It does appear however that single-party system limits the political freedoms and choices of citizens.

Political parties mediate the relationship between citizens and their government. In democracies with competitive party systems, political parties pressure governments to respond to the needs and interests of broad segments of the population. In more authoritarian governments, parties offer a structure for directing and conditioning the behavior of individual citizens. Indeed, most political parties espouse democratic principles and commitments.

Lewis (2009) posits that political parties employ different strategies for recruiting supporter for instance; ‘externally mobilized’ parties develop around leaders who lack power within an existing government. These leaders compensate by mobilizing and organizing a popular base of support from among disaffected groups in society. External mobilization has typically provided the origins of social-democratic, socialist, progressive etc. similarly, ‘internally mobilized’ parties; by contrast, usually represent a defensive strategy of counter-mobilization on the part of influential government insiders. This strategy also involves efforts to recruit a broad base of party members and supporters. Internally mobilized parties seek to neutralize the organizational efforts of another party or to gain that party's cooperation in the pursuit of goals, such as wars and fight against militancy or insurgency that requires a broad foundation of support and sacrifice.

1.2 Origin of Political Parties

Lewis (2009) posits that political parties were formed initially to advise monarchs and by the 17th and 18th centuries many legislative bodies had begun to claim independent power bases and privileges of their own. However, the origins of political parties are closely associated with the
development of the modern state and representative democracy in Western Europe and the United States. Parties evolved through the struggle of contending groups to grasp control of the apparatus of government. This struggle for power generally took place within legislatures. An early model of the modern party system developed in Britain in the 18th century, shaped around the efforts of the Whig and Tory parties to control government jobs and political influence. A party system also developed in the United States in the decade following ratification of the Constitution of the United States in 1788, pitting members of the Federalist Party against members of the Democratic-Republican Party.

As a matter of fact, in both Britain and the United States, competition between political parties undermined traditional conceptions of politics rooted in classical and Christian notions of virtue and public service. According to this tradition, political leaders should act according to a model of virtue that involved placing the common good above the interests of a fraction of the society. Leaders acting to benefit only themselves or a narrow portion of the society were considered corrupt. However, party competition required public figures to act upon a contrary set of assumptions:

1) That politics ‘naturally’ involves conflict and division, and
2) That its true goals are to secure the economic interests and political influence of groups divided along lines of class, ethnicity, race, and religion.

From the vantage point of the 20th century, some political scientists have concluded that party competition, far from corrupting a society, measurably strengthens and integrates it by providing a way to include and represent different groups and interests.

Furthermore, during the 19th century, the broad extension of voting rights to adult male citizens throughout Europe and the United States required legislators to appeal to a much larger segment of national populations. Political parties grew dramatically in size and began to take the form of independent, popularly based organizations, no longer serving merely the interests of a narrow elite. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, arguably the period when political parties in the United States reached the height of their influence, party organizations played an important role in the society. They offered the society an array of services, ranging from housing, food, and jobs to legal assistance and language instruction. In return, they sort and asked for votes from the people and they also expected loyalty in return from their victorious candidates, who as it were should remain ever mindful of the party’s role in delivering the votes.

It should be noted that whereas democracy is about participation and representation; participation is the extent to which individual members of society take part or get involved in the activities in their societies. Representation on the other hand, refers to the process by which people get chosen to act in the interest of the community or society. In modern societies, according to Agbui (2002), the dominant form of democracy is indirect or representative democracy where political parties have become the principal mechanism for ensuring citizen participation and representation in public policy, decision-making and through which individuals share democratic values.
This implies that, there can be no meaningful democracy without a properly functioning political party system. It is obvious therefore according to Agbu (2002), that political party constitute the heart of democracy. The more vigorous and healthy they are the better assured is the health of the democratic process. It is therefore difficult to imagine any modern democracy without political parties as they are the connecting links between diverse groups of peoples and governments.

As already noted earlier, the most common classification of political parties is that which emphasizes the degree of competitiveness in a political system, hence, there can be one party, two party or multi-party political systems. A more basic classification of political parties is that which highlights the nature of the membership of political parties. Accordingly, there can be:

i. Branch/Mass parties whose membership is composed of different sections of political society.

ii. Caucus/Elitist parties whose membership is drawn mainly from the upper class of society.

iii. Religious parties whose membership is determined by nature of religious affiliation.

iv. Broker parties with membership drawn from both the rich and poor classes in society.

v. Charismatic parties formed around individuals with unique talents and whose membership cuts across identity and class lines.

1.3 Evolution of Political Parties in Nigeria

As it concerns political parties in Nigeria, its history and evolution according to Badmus (2006) and Lawson (2009), can be situated within the context of the two-party and multi-party political system, which can be traced to the development of nationalist consciousness, awareness and political movements that began in Nigeria in the 1930s. This activity specifically, is what Joseph (1987) described as the second wave of nationalist movement which was less militant and resistant but mainly concerned with sentiments, activities and organizational developments aimed at the self-government and independence of Nigeria.

Joseph (1987) contends that a key distinguishing feature of the second wave of Nigerian nationalism was the development of permanent political associations to pursue nationalist objectives with the various associations formed by nationalists such as Ernest Ikoli, Herbert Macaulay, Samuel Akinsanya, Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo etc constituting the precursors of political parties in Nigeria.

Political parties in Nigeria display certain key features, which include but not limited to:

i) Their emergence and evolution has been closely tied to Nigerian Constitutional Development or evolution of Nigerian constitution. For example, it was the Clifford constitution of 1922 provision of four elective seats for Nigeria in the Legislative council that stimulated the formation of the Nigerian National Democratic Party by Herbert Macaulay. Similarly, political
party formation enjoyed a boost from the Richard's constitution of 1944 provision of regional assemblies while retaining the four elective seats to Legislative Council. Similarly the Macpherson constitution's regional assemblies and regional executive councils and system of indirect elections to Nigerian Legislative Houses in 1951 strengthened political parties’ activities in pre-independent Nigeria.

ii) Most parties have ethnic and regional bases or displayed identity orientations. For example, the Action Group, the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD) had their bases in the Yoruba dominated south-west of Nigeria. Similarly, the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) and the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) had their political strong hold in Igbo land while Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) have theirs in the Hausa-Fulani heartland of northern Nigeria.

iii) Only a few of the political parties in Nigeria can boast of having a national spread.

iv) Political parties in Nigeria are prone to serious inter-party conflicts, intra-party conflicts, divisions, splitting and decamping as observed by Badmus (2003). Furthermore, these features arise from what has been described by Olowu (1995) as caucus or elitist nature of political parties in Nigeria. The direct outcome of thinking according to Karina (2006) is that the educated minority in each ethnic group are the people who are qualified by natural right to lead their fellow nationals into higher political development. The Action Group/UPN and AD were the handiwork of Yoruba middle-class business men and intelligentsia. The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) was the creation of the Hausa-Fulani ruling class in northern Nigeria. Even the NCNC described in the literature as the only mass party in Nigeria was essentially composed of an elite core centered on an Igbo educated class and surrounded by Igbo grass root organizations.

2.0 Conceptualizing the Notion of Ethnicity

The last segment of this discuss sets the stage for the second section of this paper which bothers on ethnic politics. It will be out of place should an attempt not be made to conceptualize ethnicity. According to Pareto (1963), the term ethnicity is one of the vaguest terms known to sociology (and perhaps to Political Science). In the light of this, many attempts have been made by scholars from various disciplines to analyze, describe and define, in concrete terms, the term ethnicity.

It is therefore germane from the outset to situate ethnicity as a concept and social condition in a particular context. The concept of ethnicity according to Osaghae, (1995) and Ake, (2000) refers to a social formation that rest upon culturally specific practice and unique set of symbols and cosmology. A belief in common historical evolution provides an inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values, and hierarchies and confirms the social identities for separating both insiders and outsiders. Ethnic culture is one of the important ways people conceive of themselves and yet culture and identity are closely intertwined. Thus, ethnicity, a social construct according to Cohen, (1974); Nnoli, (1978); Osaghae, (1995); IDEA International, (2000), can also be regarded as the employment of ethnic identity and differences to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict and cooperation.
Indeed, it has also been understood within its historical context how individuals are called upon to adopt ethnic identity as explanation of who they are, what exists, what the world is, etc. In this way, the subject integrates his consciousness into conceptions of self-identity, worldview or cosmology. Ethnicity constitutes a way in which people think of themselves and others, and makes sense of the world around them. Simultaneously, it also connotes set of social relations within which social grouping such as men; women etc relate one to the other. It also refers to specific power relations at the same time as it refers to cultural relations. Embracing an ethnic identity and indeed accepting its process of socialization, does not have to conflict with that of other neighbouring identities, nor does it have to be at the cost of excluding the other.

Ethnicity pervades every society and is therefore essential or fundamental to every political approach especially a mixed environment. Ethnicity in the view of Cohen, (1993) is equally not a simple concept to theoretically define. Operationally however, ethnicity or an ethnic group can be defined as a collective of people who share some patterns of normative behaviour and form a part of a larger population that are interacting with people from other collectives. In this way, ethnicity refers to the degree of conformity by members of the collective that share norms.

Similarly, Idowu (2004) posits that in terms of definitional analysis, however, the term ethnicity points to other related terms of germane interest of which ethnic groups, nationhood and identity are prominent. Critical reflection on these terms is needed at this stage in order that obfuscating tendencies are avoided. The intellectually profiting questions at this point are: what is ethnicity? What are ethnic groups? How do we construct the idea of identity and nationhood? These are some of the questions this paper ordinarily would sought to interrogate in an attempt to critically underscore the relation between the politicization of ethnicity and the existence of a peculiar diacritic in citizenship notions.

In like manner, ethnicity according to Hauer (2004) has also been described as individuals identifying themselves with a collective of people with whom they share patterns of normative behaviour and feel solidarity with. As a social identity, the effects of ethnicity result in both gain and loss interactions affecting outcomes. In this way, it has both positive and negative effects such that political parties use various tools and techniques to learn much about people’s identities and culture as much as possible, in order to win the acceptability of people. Likewise the performance and acceptability of political parties among particular ethnic groups is tied to the perception, appreciation and how the ethnic group identifies with the party.

2.1 Ethnic Politics in Africa
It is important to note that Cohen (2013) have affirmed that the introduction and/or experimentation of the federal system resulted into regionalism and this has given rise to the emergence of political parties that are established along ethnic and tribal lines and indeed along regional boundaries. For instance in the North, there was the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) led by Mallam Aminu Kano, in the Middle Belt, there was the Middle Belt Congress led by Joseph Tarka, in the East, was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameron (NCNC) with high numerical strength and was led Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and other Eastern politicians. In the West was Action Congress (AC) led Chief Obafemi Awolowo.
Ethnicity is by implication considered and identified as one of the important issues affecting democratization and nation-building especially on the continent of Africa. Nyuot Yoh, (2004) hold that ethnicity is believed to have had great impact, in fact more impact than other factors, on how politics and nation-building processes are pursued in Africa. Furthermore, the issues of religion and ethnic identity have dominated the politics of democratization and nation-building in Africa. The complexity of ethnicity in African grass root politics and political parties are due to the fact that African ethnic groups are bond not only by kinship, but also by principles.

The manner in which a particular ethnicity advances specific political and may be economic interest is partly at the heart of this paper. In line with the arguments of Nnoli (1980), Nigerian politics and political parties have presented an image of struggle among various ethnic groups for the sharing of national resources. Thus, as observed by Crawford (1993) social competition in the country first is for placement and preferment, political competition in the Nigerian arena subsequently, placed ethnicity in the center of political cognition of political struggle. These appear to have led to ethnic militia movements which obviously represent the extreme form of ethnic agitation for self-determination thus making ethnic groups to assume militant posture which bear an ethnic identity and purport to act as the machinery through which the desires of its people are sought to be realized and as such unwittingly create flash points around the country thus resulting into ethnic nationalism.

Indeed, Aluko, (2003) argues that one dimension of the problem with ethnic nationalism is that most Nigerians are not patriotic. Aluko, (2003) further posits that right from 1960, patriotism, as far as Nigeria is concerned, has been thrown into the river and ever since, it was replaced by individualism, personalism, sectionalism, nepotism and parochialism. To worsen matters, you hardly could find loyalty to a cause, a symbiotic construct of patriotism, in an average Nigerian. The highest levels of patriotism are expressed at the sub national levels. The common explanation for this is that Nigeria is not doing enough to attract the patriotism of its citizens.

Most importantly, Aluko, (2003) insists that Nigeria daily shirks its governmental responsibilities to its citizenry. It is incapable of providing food, shelter, security and other basic necessities. Nigerians don’t feel the impact of Nigeria in their lives. Because Nigeria is incapable of doing anything for Nigerians, it is thus a gratuitous insult for her to demand patriotism from her citizens. Again, most students of politics will readily agree with Locke and others that a nation compels patriotism and loyalty when the citizens perceive it to be representative of, and pursing their common good. A tentative hypothesis therefore would be that where a nation does not take sufficient care of its citizens, the level of patriotism is likely to be low and vice versa.

As to why this should be the case, two plausible reasons have been adduced by Ake, (1978) as follows; first, ethnic nationalism was already well developed before the nationalist era. Ethnic loyalty was something that made sense to a lot of people, and its utility was already demonstrated in the urban areas, where ethnic associations catered for the needs of new immigrants from the countryside. Secondly, the appeal to ethnicity was very likely to be successful in a society with little industrialization and a rudimentary development of secondary associations. In another instance, Ake (2000) argued that the civil society in Africa is so rudimentary that political society is not constituted as a ‘public’, a unity of abstract legal subjects and a solidarity of complementarities and reciprocities arising from their self-seeking. Instead of
political society being one public, it is segmented into a plurality of competing and alienated primary publics, because people are alienated from the state and tend to give their primary loyalty to ethnic, sub-national or communal groups rather than the state.

Ake, (1978) and Aluko, (2003) emphasize that in the theoretical model of patriotism, allegiance and loyalty of a typical Nigerian illustrated below, one is able to see what an average Nigerian stands for in his or her relationship with the Nigerian state. First, a typical Nigerian thinks of ‘self’ before others. And when he or she thinks of others, the thought is about members of both the nuclear and the extended families. Similarly, a typical Nigerian is more likely to think of people from his or her native town or village and then to the level of the ethnic group. From the level of the ethnic group, the loyalty, allegiance and patriotism of a typical Nigerian move to that of the religious group. This is because most Nigerians are deeply or very religious and have very strong emotional attachment to one religion or the other. This perhaps explains the reason why ethno-religious violence is prevalent in Nigeria.

The final stage to be reached under the theoretical model of patriotism, allegiance and loyalty is that of the nation. Everyone puts the nation last in the scheme of things. Even some past Heads of state and highly placed Nigerians are not left out. They make parochial declarations and utterances all in the spirit of protecting ethno-religious agenda and interests. Again, these goes further to lend credence to the assertion that most Nigerians have not imbibed the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. Thus it is not surprising to find people more patriotic at ethnic or sub-national levels than at the national levels. There is no doubt that these ethnic biases can negate the principles of democracy, the same reason for which political parties exist.

It is important to note that one of the essences of political parties is to help deepen or entrench democracy and democratic ethos and to that extent serve as a vehicle for ethnic unification as opposed to divisiveness. In the contemporary world however, democracy has become a popular concept in nearly every day discourse. As a matter of fact, the term democracy originally referred to the right of the citizens of the Greek City States to participate directly in the act of governance, while Carter (1978) is of the view that democracy is like the experience of life itself-always changing, infinite in its variety, sometimes turbulent and all the more valuable for having been tested for adversity. Democracy or polycentric administration as put forward by Olowu, (1995) is a system of governance that underscores the plural nature of politics and hence gives recognition to the diversity of social forces in any political community. A democratic administration accommodates other forces by providing for a polycentric political order which not only recognizes these forces formally but enables them to interact one with the other in diverse ways, in competition, collaboration or cooperation.

Similarly, a democratic administration serves the citizens rather than the other way round. According to Sartori (1987) democracy exists when relations between the governed and the government abides by the principle that the state is at the service of the citizens and not the citizens at the service of the state, that the government exists for the people not vice-versa.

Idowu, (1996) and Schumpeter, (1994) respectively posit that democracy is a system of governance which allows people to freely elect their leaders and hold them accountable and which provides opportunities for the greater number of people to use their human potentials to
survive in dignity and democracy is the institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote. Political order therefore, is the existence of an enabling environment for citizens of a country to pursue the normal business of life that is consistent with their fundamental human rights and privileges that are enshrined in the constitution. This concept will have relevance to democracy if it is able to reinforce the process of political power acquisition and appropriation of what has commonly come to be referred to in Nigeria as the dividend of democracy.

3.0 Conclusion
From the foregoing, it can be deduced that this is where African political parties can play important role to bring about or better still, help to entrench democracy and thus better the society by way of reducing or eliminating the adverse effects of ethnic politics. This can be achieved through the functions of political parties as enunciated by Nwankwo (2008) which include:

a. Articulation of people’s views  
b. Aggregation of interests  
c. Agenda setting for the government  
d. National integration  
e. Leadership recruitment  
f. Political socialization  
g. Constructive criticism of the government  
h. Mobilization for election and development

These functions are considered self-explanatory and as such there may not be need for further explanations. Howbeit, the pluralistic character of most African states has led to the development of mechanisms of adjustment that should enable the accommodation of the interests and needs of diverse ethnic groups. Most African societies such as Nigeria have as posited by Eghosa (2006) developed norms and procedures that have continued to enable the maintenance of ethnic balance within the political and administrative institutions.

To further buttress this position about the Nigerian state, Obasanjo (2001) opined that there is no peaceful way out for anybody getting out of Nigeria. So we might as well find a peaceful way of living together. I know there are peaceful (and harmonious) ways of living together, and that is our creed; indeed that is what we are struggling for. This is definitely part of the roles that political parties can play in a polycentric society like Nigeria.

It is against this background that this paper concludes that ethnicity is not a trajectory for national devolution or fragmentation in a multicultural, complex, plural or what the west may want to call ‘divided states’. Africa in general or Nigeria in particular should not be seen as obdurately or naturally ethnic and therefore sentenced to pernicious circumstances, rather, political parties can through their manifestoes bring about material prosperity, democracy and good governance which can become an element or subject of integration.
References


