

# The Role of Opposition Political Parties in the Development of Democracy in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** With the recent quest across African continent for good governance in a democratic setting and development in a transcultural society, the need to examine the mode of leadership becomes important. Sustainable and strong democracy is dependent on the existence of well-organized and functioning political parties. The institution remains a crucial actor in bringing together diverse interests, recruits and present candidates, and develops competing policy proposals that provide people with a choice. In a democracy world over and Nigeria in particular there is no substitute for open competition between political parties. The objective of the paper is therefore to examine the roles of opposition political parties in Nigeria and its role in sustaining the democratic development in the country. The research adopted expository method, hermeneutics and by its nature generates data from empirical and secondary sources. The finding of the study reveals that the opposition political parties are faced with problems of understanding their roles in the development of Nigerian democracy as partners in development, corruption and lacked political development strategies. The paper taking into consideration these problems probed the prospect of democracy in the country and recommended among others that opposition political parties in the Nigeria should focus attention on evolving an ideology for economic development of the country instead of attaching much importance to primordial issues.

**Keywords:** Opposition Political Parties, Democracy, Nigeria

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Date of Submission: 08-05-2019

Date of acceptance: 24-05-2019

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## I. INTRODUCTION

[1], perhaps one of the most studied and well known political philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Rousseau is credited to have influenced the French Revolution and more notably the development of modern political, sociological and educational thought. *Common will*; he argued- that human beings are able to function with one common agenda shared amongst the people and their ruling class. Although he did less in explaining how this will be discovered and decided, he influenced a small niche of rulers to now fully determine the common will of all people-totalitarianism. This particular thinking by Rousseau influenced fully fledged totalitarianism regimes where deviations from the imposed mandatory *common good* – outlined by the ruling class- were not tolerated. This ideology influenced to some extent, thoughts around a more liberal concept of governing.

Democracy stands opposed to the idea of common will by all citizens in a state. Modern mass societies are characterised by a variety of interests, world views and beliefs; as such, no single government or political organisation can embody the interests of all society. Governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century yearns for diverse political parties thriving towards common principles of freedom, justice and solidarity, for different causes and different groupings of society. It is now harder for homogeneity in any system of governance. A modern re-shared principle of term limits for presidents' stems from the premise that societies evolve, interests shift and change is inevitable. It is important to note the synonymous nature of ideological progression and the rule of law.

In a political and truly democratic endeavour, the foundational basis for balance leads to the horizontal separation of powers rather than any vertical formulation of any kind of corruption of this pragmatic ethos. Central to this balance in government is that of the expression of opposition on a parallel political level [2]. Opposition must not be for opposition sake and it must be devoid of violence and must be within the globally accepted standard or best practice. The people in government are not angels; they are human. They are liable to make mistakes and in the same way as party in opposition. The only duty an opposition party need is to provide an alternative view and this must be properly dissected, articulated and effectively communicated to the general public. It must be realized by both government and opposition that the aspiration to be in government is for one common goal-service to the people. From the dynamics of the happenings in Nigeria, it is clear that apart from a very few individuals in and out of government, it appears that the majority of the political class are "crass

opportunists". It has nothing to do with any political party and neither does it have any coloration of ruling or opposition party.

## **II. POLITICAL PARTIES AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

Political party is more or less an organized group of citizens who act together as a political unit. Members of a political party share the same opinions on public questions and exercising their voting power towards a common end, seek to obtain control of government [3]. It is an association organized in support of some principles or policy which by constitutional means endeavors to make the determinants of government. Political parties are tools, not only for representing the electorates, but also a way for the electorate to hold parties accountable for their actions and promise [4]. It is a political organization that typically seeks to attain and maintain political power within government, usually by participating in electoral campaigns, educational outreach or protest actions [5].

It is a more or less organized group of citizens who act together as political unit, have distinctive aims and opinions on the leading political question of controversy in the state and who by acting together as a political unit seek to obtain control of governance [6]. It is different from other social groups such as labor unions and other association because of the unique function a political party performs for the system, political parties are major "inputting" devices, allowing citizens to get their needs and wishes heard by government. Without parties, individuals will stand alone and be hired by the government. At a minimum, parties give people the feeling that they are not utterly powerless and this belief helps maintain government legitimacy. Political party therefore is a group of citizens of a given polity who shares common ideas on how to win the confidence of electorates, based on their strategies for governance.

The earliest known political parties in Nigeria were formed as far back as the early 1920s. Prominent among them then was the Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP) under the leadership of Sir Herbert Macaulay, sequel to the provision in the Clifford Constitution for four elected members into then forty-six member Legislative Council. The formation of the NNDP was followed in 1934 by Lagos Youth Movement (LYM), which was later renamed Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM). The early 1950s saw the emergence of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) led by Dr Nnamdi Azikwe, the Action Group (AG) by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) with Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello as its leader. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) and The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in 1959 eventually coalesced and formed a government in 1960 when Nigeria first got her political independence. Dr Nnamdi Azikwe was made the President (Ceremonial), while Sir Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa emerged the prime Minister symbolizing close political affinity between the Hausa and Igbo political hegemony which came to an end when civil war broke out in 1967. There were also some political parties such as Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) that was radical in posture, and an arch-rival of Northern People's Congress (NPC) [7].

On 15th January, 1966, civil rule was terminated through military coup which the Junta remained in power for over thirty years with interruption from internal factional coups and counter-coups. During the Second Republic, five political parties emerged. These are; National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the Peoples' Redemption Party (PRP), the Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP) and the Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP). These parties re-incarnated from those of the first Republic without a clear difference in prevailing political ideology. Similarly, on 31st December, 1983, General Muhammadu Buhari terminated the journey with the allegation of corruption and indiscipline [8]. The preparations and process of 1993 General Elections midwife by the Military Government of General Ibrahim Babangida was one of the longest transition program in Nigeria. The only registered political parties that emerged and contested the elections are the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). The annulment on 12th June, 1993 of the presidential election result that was adjudged to be the most transparent and fair election marked yet another turning-point in Nigeria's political history. This singular action consumed the regime, and the coming-in of the Abacha administration [9]. Following the death of General Sani Abacha on June 8, 1998, the transition of the Fourth Republic under General Abdulsalam Abubakar brought into existence some political parties that wrestled for power during the period. These parties are the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP). The early stage of re-democratization process saw the stifling of political parties' space, with difficult position imposed by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). It took the intervention of the Supreme Court in 2002 for INEC to liberalize the political party arena and allow political competition to flourish. Presently, there are more than thirty registered political parties in the country [10].

### **III. OPPOSITION PARTIES AND THEIR ROLES IN DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

The political party that has the majority is called ruling party and all other parties or their members are called the Opposition. In politics, the opposition comprises one or more political parties or other organized groups that are opposed to the government (or, in American English, the administration), party or group in political control of a city, region, state or country. It is the party that goes against another party. The degree of opposition varies according to political conditions - for example, across authoritarian and liberal systems where opposition may be repressed or welcomed. According to [11], "a strong opposition may be the most effective means of creating checks in hybrid regimes and, therefore, the most important prerequisite for democratic deepening." It is obvious that political parties seek political power directly and they do not pretend to do so. Opposition parties do what they do to improve their chances of replacing the government in power at the next available opportunity. A credible opposition holds the ruling party accountable. It scrutinizes its actions and criticizes its policies. It questions the use of state funds and proposes alternatives. In a democratic system, citizens vote for the opposition and hope it keeps its promises. This prevents complacency in the ruling party and forces it to work hard at governing well. A strong opposition challenges the ruling party [12].

An effective opposition is absolutely indispensable to the emergence and consolidation of a stable democratic order. It puts the ruling party on its feet. Where there is no opposition or the opposition is weak, the ruling party is not challenged to initiate programmes and ideas that are beneficial to the masses. There is no doubt that opposition parties are essential to democracy. They are necessary for building and strengthening democracy. In fact, without the formal existence of opposition parties, true democracy would not exist. In addition, opposition parties bring opportunities for representation and participation.

Opposition party is expected to engage in constant criticisms of the governmental policies which are formulated by the majority, to scrutinize carefully the manner in which these policies are administered, and to keep the possibility of alternative legislative policies and administrative practices constantly in the view of the electorate [13]. Opposition parties in Nigerian democracy remained ineffective due to their failure to form coalitions that will give a strong opposition to the ruling party and make them obey the rule of the game for people to enjoy the dividend of democracy. In the views of [14], a viable opposition facilitates institutional arrangements that enable the performance of a variety of public interest functions.

However, the level of ethnic rivalry in Nigeria has made it impossible for her to produce the right leaders who live above boards, who exude impeccable and predictable character, and who are ready to spend themselves for the development of the nation. Ethnic affiliation has not allowed such leaders to emerge. At each election, the emphasis has always been on where the candidates came from rather than on the right candidates for the election. This explains why the notion of political opposition are usually grounded on the principle of fighting or antagonizing an individual that is not from the ethnic group of the opposing party and thus destroy the aim for true fight for democracy. Historical analysis of inter and intra-party interactions in Nigeria is a significant area that can guide in understanding the institutional roles of the political parties in either perfecting the democratic system or derailing the whole process. The political parties of the first republic were regionally rooted, and this got its origin in the crisis of Nigerian Youth Movement in early forties when Ethnicity and its attendant parochialization and regionalization of issues appears to be in the ascendance since the Ikoli – Akinsanya crisis in the NYM which dismembered the party. This crisis not only split the party but as shall be seen led to ethnicity and the regionalization of politics and elections in Nigeria [15]. Furthermore, when the Lytleton Constitution of 1954 formerly recognizes political parties and party system, it was evident that the politicization of ethnicity and the regionalization of politics have been generally entrenched.

In the words of [16], the federal elections result in 1959 revealed the decisive role of ethnicity in Nigerian politics, particularly during elections. The seeds of ethnic and regional politics sown and nurtured by the Nigerian leaders and the British especially from the forties have taken a firm root and begun to bear fruits. The resultant effect of this regionalization led to politicization of 1963 National Population Census and its aftermath crisis, the Western Nigeria regional election of 1965, among others, and the 1964 General Elections which was the first since flag independence was described as 'the most perilous display of brinkmanship' [17]. This was described by [18] as a period which Nigeria was tottered perilously on the brink of disintegration and bloodshed. These prepared the ground for the January 1966 coup and the counter-coup of July 1966, and a final blow to democratic rule.

The Second Republic political parties and their leaders resorted to the same political tricks and campaigns, by easily exploiting the situation for their individual and selfish interest – projecting themselves as champions of the commoners, and their respective ethnic groups. The leaders of the major political parties; the NPN, UPN and NPP were known to have made some statements during campaigns by calling and linking parties to the former First Republic parties [19]. In the process, campaign slogans were targeted to arousing ethnic sentiments with little or no emphasis on socio-economic and political programs concerning the development of the country. Furthermore, when the NPN was unable to command majority in the National

Assembly, as such, work out an accord with NPP which was just similar to the First Republic accord between NPC and NCNC that is Hausa Igbo coalition, and had to rely on fragile coalition in order to take off. From 1979 through 1982, the period was marked by a legal tussle between NPN and UPN on the issue of one third majority, inter party clashes and conflicts especially between NPN and PRP in some Northern states especially Kaduna and Kano, corruption and mismanagement, elections rigging and snatching of ballot

The preparations and process of 1993 aborted third republic general elections midwife by the General Ibrahim Babangida military administration was one of the longest transition program in Nigeria. Two political parties – the National Republican Convention (NRC) that fielded a presidential candidate from the North, and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) with a Southern presidential candidate. The voting procedure used was the option A4 as it represents a great departure from the conventional voting procedure earlier used. Unfortunately, after the successful conclusion of the first and second phases of the elections, the annulment on 12th June, 1993 of the Presidential election result that was adjudged to be the most transparent and fair election marked yet another turning-point in Nigeria's political history.

The return to democracy in 1998/99 further attempted to re-introduced politics of regionalism in Nigeria, though not so glaring as was the case in the past transitions. The Alliance for Democracy (AD) controlled the Western states, the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) captured some Northern states and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) emerged the ruling party. These parties compete in a centrifugal manner though without any ideological demarcation, but engaged in a 'politics of outbidding' with one another [6]. This period witnessed the enthusiasms by Nigerians for a democratic rule, as such the election served as a litmus test and inter-party relations was at a premature level. It was not until when the country was preparing for 2003 General Elections events started to manifest, intra and inter-party crisis engulfed the whole scenario. The elections which was a transition from civilian to civilian government, ended in bitterness and rancor, boycotts, manhandling, Kidnapping and assassination of political opponents, thuggery and manipulation of electoral process.

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Grace Umezurike. "The Role of Opposition Political Parties in the Development of Democracy in Nigeria." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. vol. 24 no. 05, 2019, pp. 09-13.