POLITICAL PARTIES AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION: REFLECTIONS ON NIGERIA SINCE 1999

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Abstract

There is consensus among scholars that of political party is an instrument for promoting national integration of culturally variegated societies and democratic sustenance. This is by virtue of its diverse social base and organizational arrangement, which link the rulers with the ruled on the one hand and, on the other hand, peoples of diverse socio-cultural leanings. The importance of this role is underscored by the fact that the task of engendering national cohesion cannot be confined strictly to formal state institutions alone. Taking a cursory look at the Nigerian state, this paper examines the socio cultural variations of the entity vis-à-vis the expected roles of political parties in national integration. Thus, drawing heavily from experiences since 1999, it is held that Nigerian political parties are yet to comprehend or appreciate its role in the task of national integration and nation building. Rather, the contradictions they engender do reinforce the integration crises.

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation of extraordinary diversity[1]. Indeed, scholars are agreed that it is a culturally variegated society characterized by multiplicity of languages, culture, ethnic and religious groupings whose coming together under a single political authority owe its origin to colonial experience. With ethnic groupings variously estimated to be between 250 and over 400, it also has a multiplicity of religious groups dominant among which are the Christianity and Islamic faiths. Interestingly, its religious groups closely coincide with ethnic and geographic boundaries[2]. As noted by the Human Rights Watch, many of these ethnic groups had no meaningful relationship with one another before

being shoehorned into the same colony by the British Government in 1914. Consequently, Nigerian politics has always revolved around an obsession with the difficult task of forging out a nation out of the complex diversity'[3]. In other words, managing this complex diversity which over the years has continued to impinge on inter group relations remained a major cog to the achievement of national integration. National integration implies alleviation of discontinuities and divisive tendencies among the diverse peoples in a polity. According to Coleman and Roseberg, integration implies 'the progressive reduction of cultural and regional tensions and discontinuities in the process of creating a homogeneous political community'[4]. Implicit in this is that while national integration does not presuppose the displacement of existing cultural ties and loyalties, conscious efforts must be made to ensure that they are less consequential in affecting behaviours especially with implications for the national entity. This was also the views of Schabowsca and Himmelstrand when they opined that national integration means an identification of the population with the broader community other than its own group, without reaching however, beyond the country's borders and, the emergence of such bond does not breach ethnic solidarity[5]. In other-words, national integration is a strategy for communally fragmented societies in which the political system accommodates the communal groups and at the same time attempt to promote a sense of common loyalty to the national entity. The import of the above statement is that, the state and its institutions have vital roles to play in the process of national integration.

But while formal institutions of the state such as the legislature, executive and judiciary, matters a lot for successful integration, the problems emanating from their systemic perversion by extraneous forces coupled with declining capacity of the state

makes non formal institutions to be equally important in the task of national integration. By virtue of its diverse social base, political parties tend to be one of such institutions that could engender national integration of plural societies. As noted by Kautsky, viable political structures such as political parties, trade unions and pressure groups when they operate effectively, integrates first at lower level which in turn serves as basis for a wider and national integration[6]. This he noted has been the practice in Central Europe where labour unions and parties have become sufficiently powerful to gain significant concessions for the workers and a measure of influence in the political system that held out prospects for more influence in the integration of new and growing working class into the society[7]. In this context, where and how do Nigerian political parties rank? To what extent have they developed into formidable organizations that could promote national integration? What factors serves to explain the current status of Nigerian political parties vis-à-vis the task of national integration? Addressing this issues form the crux of this article. The next section examines some theoretical issues on parties and national integration. Thereafter is a historical roll down on parties and national integration in Nigeria. This in turn is followed by examination of the country's experience since 1999 and some possible explanations for the current predicament. Finally is the concluding remark.

Theoretical Discourse

Political parties are a core institution necessary for the sustenance of any democratic political system. This is because as organizations involved in electoral politics, with the major intent of capturing and exercising political power either singly in coalition with others, they are in the process performing several functions necessary for

maintenance of the system. These include political recruitment, training and education, socialization, communication and building consensus among others. It must, however, be stated that as parties perform this functions, they are invariably performing what scholars have noted as integrative function of parties. For instance, David Apter has noted that through their recruitment practices, parties build the 'channels of communication…between otherwise hostile or non communicating groups, bringing them into sets of relationships on which the state is built'[8]. Moreover, political parties as popular organizations with diverse social base and organizational arrangements that linked peoples of diverse socio cultural standing, holds prospects for mobilizing the diverse elements toward the achievement of a larger societal goal. As noted earlier, political parties in Western Europe as a result of their wide social base exercise some measure of influence in the political system which holds greater prospects for a wider and national integration.

Equally, it has also been argued that political parties help create a sense of political community and efficacy necessary for national integration. This notion has long been canvassed by William Chambers while commenting on American political parties when he argued that this can be done in three ways: i) by supporting the new constitutional order in its hour of uncertainty and testing even in the face of disagreements over specific provisions of the constitution. ii) by strengthening and maintaining communication and, a sense of shared stakes among different groups in the state and iii) by undertaking recruitment and socialization, and providing popular education in politics on an informal basis[9]. It must, however, be stated that situations like this represent the ideal and is typical of parties in developed democracies. On the

contrary, political parties in, especially, developing societies often have their activities in this regard punctured by a number of intervening variables such as the level of development of the parties themselves in terms of institutionalization, cohesion, party discipline among others; the way politics is played and above all, prevailing political culture of the society. This has been the paradox in several African countries where the institution of political party is weak and susceptible to various forms of manipulation by political actors. In this case, the integrative roles of political parties are hardly performed while they remain not only a mere tool for contesting elections but as well, an instrument of societal polarization.

Nigerian Parties and Nigeria's Integration: The Historical Past

Nigeria's adventure into party politics began in 1922 with the Clifford constitution which introduced elective principle in the country. By this, the stage was set for the emergence of party organizations and by the same 1922 the first major political party emerged. This was the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) led by Hebert Macaulay. Other parties later emerged from the various socio-cultural organizations in existence then. They include the Action Group (AG) which was formed in 1951 from E*gbe Omo Oduduwa*; Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) which emerged from *Jammah Mutenen Arewa* and the National Council of Nigerian and Northern Cameroon (NCNC). Following the death of NNDP in the late 1940s, the AG, NCNC and NPC remained the three dominant parties in the country. Although there were some others parties in existence such as, the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) and the Northern Elements Progress Union (NEPU), they were not as strong in electoral support as the earlier three mentioned. It is important to note that, these parties of pre independence era (NCNC, AG

and NPC) could be described as nationalist parties because they were united in the common aim of putting an end to colonial rule and achieve independence for the country. Obviously, in spite of their regional/socio-cultural antecedent, they were able to reduce the salience and potency of any cultural intolerance among them and their supporters. Thus, as the anti-colonial struggles in Nigeria, as elsewhere, 'were a mobilization exercise *par excellence*, the political parties achieved a high degree of mobilization of the citizenry to end formal colonialism.[10] To this extent, it could be argued that political parties of this period were a major factor in the integration of Nigerians towards a national course. Unfortunately, this trend changed at the approach of independence.

Indeed, the certainty and approach of independence changed the modus operandi and orientation of Nigerian political parties. As independence approached, there developed thick rivalry among the parties as each struggle to succeed the departing colonial government. Each, therefore, resulted to ethnic mobilization to garner support, which explains their eventual degeneration into ethnic pressure groups. Consequently at independence and up to the collapse of the First Republic, there was no real national party just as the task of national integration was jeopardized by the prevalence of ethnic chauvinism, bigotry and extreme intolerance emanating from activities of the political parties. Even the NCNC which hitherto tended a little towards been a national party receded while the popularity of its leader, Dr. Nnamdi Azizkiwe, among the people also wane from 'Zik of Africa' to 'Zik of Ibo land'. Nothing this pervasive trend, J.D Ojo observed that:

> There was no doubt that the Nigerian leaders worsened the situation by
>
> not evolving a national party that would unite the country. Instead, the

three major parties, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the National

Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) and the Action Group (AG) were

regionally based and drawing support from their regions…[11]

Little wonder, therefore, that the period up to the end of the First Republic was

characterised by various forms of political intolerance, violence and abuse of democratic

processes as evidenced in the *wetie* saga (arson) and other forms of political intimidation

that took place, especially in the then western region. As a result, the country was on the

verge of disintegration before the military struck on 15 January 1966 to terminate the

civilian   rule thereby bringing to an end the era of destructive party politics in the

country. [12]

Democratic party politics returned to Nigeria in the Second Republic (1979-1983)

following a five stage transition program anchored by the Muritala-Obasanjo military

administration.[13] In order to avoid the degeneration of parties into regional / ethnic

champions and its attendant consequences on national integration as was witnessed in the

First Republic, the Muritala-Obasanjo administration introduced into the 1979

constitution some requirements that would compel moderation on the part of political

parties and that would serve as platform for nationalist parties to emerge. This is because

the provision for a Presidential system of government, a political association was

expected to have members and offices in all the 19 states of the federation as

precondition for its registration as a political party. In addition, a candidate for the post of

President of the Federal Republic was expected to score at least two-third of total votes in

at least two-third number of states in the federation before being declared winner. Lofty

as this idea was, however, it later generated another round of controversy bothering on

the right interpretation of the constitutional provision on two-third. In the main, five political parties were registered to contest the 1979 general elections. These were, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Nigerian Peoples' Party (NPP), Peoples' Redemption Party PRP), and Great Nigeria Peoples' Party (GNPP). A sixth one, Nigeria Advanced Party (NAP), joined the array to contest the 1983 round of elections. Unfortunately, in spite of governments desire to have national parties, most of them eventually turned out to be reincarnates of political parties of the First Republic. For instance, the NPN, UPN, NPP and PRP were similar both in leadership, values and orientation to the NPC, AG, NCNC and NEPU of the First Republic respectively. Although leadership of the NPN could not be said to be out-rightly the same with that of NPC, but the origin of the party and the dominant influence within it owe its origin to the same northern oligarchy that was behind the NPC. Equally, the distribution of party offices and political posts in some parties was lopsided and shows ethnic influence. For instance, the leader of the UPN, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, not only double as the party's presidential candidate, the party also picked its vice presidential candidate in the 1979 election from the same region as the presidential candidate. Thus in the Second Republic as well, activities of political parties were seen to engender polarization rather than attempt at national integration. Intra and inter party crises were rife much as politics was completely reduced to a zero sum game of what one loses, the other gains. Ethnic and regional politics became aggravated as the trend of electoral support shows. Each of the dominant party in each region (NPN in the North, UPN in the West and NPP in the East) enjoyed total victory and absolute control of their respective regions in both the1979 and

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1983 presidential elections. Even in the governorship elections, each party was seen to have won the highest number of states in their respective regions[14].

To underscore the deep-rooted ethnic base of the parties, one would recall the attempt by the ruling NPN to impose its gubernatorial candidate, Akin Omoboriowo, as governor in the old Ondo state through surreptitious means which was fiercely rebuffed by the people of the area who were major UPN supporters. The NPN attempt, apparently, led to bloodshed and only came under control when the election was upturned and the rival UPN candidate was installed. This goes to show the extent to which the UPN had control of the region. Like the First Republic, excesses of parties and politicians brought the country close on the verge of disintegration and total anarchy before the military struck again on December 31 1983 to terminate the Second Republic. Thus began a second phase of military rule in the country.

The second phase of military rule in Nigeria spanned a period of 16 years (1983 to 1999) and witnessed an 'endless' transition to civil rule program. During this period, Nigeria witnessed several military coups and counter coups as well as what can be aptly dubbed 'Transition Without End' to borrow the words of Diamond et al.[15] It was during this period that Nigeria experienced its moribund Third Republic which featured only the two government imposed political parties. These were the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC)[16]. But unlike the First and Second Republic parties, the SDP and NRC, to a large extent, appear to live above the troubled waters of ethnic and sectional chauvinism and had the prospect of emerging as national parties. This can be justified by the trend and outcome of electoral support which showed the parties as having a somewhat nationaloutlook[17]. For instance, despite the fact that the

SDP presidential candidate and running mate came from the Yoruba speaking west and Hausa/ Fulani group of the north respectively, in addition to both being Muslims, the party still won majority votes in Christian dominated Ibo region of the south such as Anambra, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Delta and Edo states. This is in spite of the fact that the counterpart NRC had a Christian and Ibo from the east as its running mate. Conversely, the SDP lost to the NRC in some core Muslim dominated areas such as Bauchi, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger and Sokoto states[18]. However, this prospect never materialized as the Republic was truncated by its architect, General Ibrahim Babangida, following his annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and his consequent 'stepping aside' after handing power over to an Interim National Government (ING), headed by Earnest Shonekan. Events thereafter such as the sack of the ING and all the inherited democratic structures by General Sanni Abacha; formation of five new political parties crafted to fulfill his ambition of transmuting to a civilian president; his sudden death on June 8, 1998 and eventual assumption of power by General Abdulsalami Abubakar are now history and has been well documented[19]. What is however important to be noted for now is that aside from the period when Nigeria was under colonial administration, political parties in the country have done little to engender national integration. Rather, the series of ethnic/sectional mobilization strategies they embark upon often aggravate the level of polarization among the people. This tendency as well has been a contributory factor to the truncation of the First and Second Republics. Although the Third Republic was not ripe enough to reveal its inner linings before it was terminated, yet, there was nothing to suggest that political parties of this period would not have gone the way of earlier ones considering the manner at which ethno-religious

sentiments colored people's perceptions and reactions to the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and subsequent political developments aftermath. In any case, what lessons have political parties of the Fourth Republic learnt from this previous experiences? Better still, has this experiences caused any change in the role of political parties in ensuring national cohesion? This is the focus of the next section.

Experience Since 1999

The journey towards a Fourth Nigerian Republic commenced in 1998 when a new transition to civil rule program was initiated by the military regime of General Abdulsalami Abubakar who assumed power after the death of General Sanni Abacha. Indeed, the charged domestic atmosphere coupled with international pressures for democratization made the embrace of multi party democracy inevitable. Thus, the Fourth Republic formally began with three major parties contesting the April 1999 general elections. These were the Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Peoples' Party (APP) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP)[20]. However, political exigencies in the country have made the registration of more parties inevitable to the extent that the country currently has over forty registered political parties. [21]

Given the scenario under which the Fourth Republic began and the compromises and alliances that produced the initial three parties, there was the expectation among Nigerians that these parties would be able to synthesize and reconcile the multitude of competing interests into a broad national value that would eventually produce an integrated Nigeria. Moreover, as none of the parties (with the exception of AD which cognates with *Afenifere*, a Pan Yoruba Socio- Cultural Organization) was known to be an off-shoot or affiliate of any sectional interest. However, unfolding events thwarted this

high optimism as the political scene became characterized by 'frequent discords, threats of impeachment of executives, treacheries… inter communal rivalries and resurgence of factional cleavages…'among others[22]. This made it practically impossible for parties to perform their expected roles in the political system. As noted earlier, when parties perform the roles of political recruitment and consensus building among others, they are invariably performing the integrative role of parties. Moreover, integration involves arriving at consensus on issues and the building of bridges along cultural divides. Indeed, political parties in Nigeria have since inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999 been engulfed in series of intra and inter party crises which have reduced them merely to an instrument for conducting elections and advancing the interest of a political godfather. Consequently, they tend to aggravate existing cleavages in the society. For instance, the ethno communal clashes that rocked the city of Jos between year 2001 and 2005 and the series of religious violence in the north especially, following the introduction of the *Sharia* legal code in some parts and their protractile and escalating dimension could be attributed to ineptitude on the part of parties in rising to the challenge of bridging communication gap among citizens as well as dangers of politicizing existing ethno-religious cleavages.

Perhaps we may reason, that one of the reasons why parties under the present Republic could not engender national integration lie in series of internal problems faced by the parties. Indeed, when internal cohesion is lacking, parties cannot serve as springboard for a wider and national integration. Rather, more time and resources are spent on mending fences between aggrieved members of the party and / or trying to reform it. For instance, the PDP which claims to be the largest party in Africa is perhaps

the most factionalized to the extent that many of its founding members including two of its past national chairmen and the immediate past Vice President of Nigeria, Atiku Abubakar, are no longer card carrying members of the party[23]. In this context where a party cannot integrate its members fully into its fold, how does it assist in integrating a larger Nigerian society? This is as well the dilemma of all other major parties such as the ANPP, AD, All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) and the newly formed Action Congress (AC).

The unitary structure of Nigerian Political Parties may yet be advanced as another reason why they could not serve integrative purposes. Nigeria is federation of much diversity. These diversities are expressed at every level of relation including intra party relations. But because the parties are unitary in structure with directions flowing from the centre to state organs, the complexities of existing diversities are not given prompt concern. Thus, it is easier for the national office of parties to issue directives or even impose a particular candidate for an election in the states. While such action in most cases causes friction between members of the party at state level, it also sensitizes (rightly or wrongly) even non party members of a possible grand plan to jeopardize their peculiar local interest and values. When the party's action meets with fierce resistance therefore, it results in ethno communal and religious crises or other forms of political disturbance. The political disturbances that trailed the PDP party primaries in Anambara and Edo states prelude to the 2007 elections can be linked to this trend.

Political vagrancy of party chieftains may also erode the tendency of parties to integrate. Defined as, the tendency for politicians to change their party affiliation at will in response to their personal but often selfish desires, political vagrancy in Nigeria dated

back to the period before independence[24]. Ever since, it has remained a recurring phenomenon in party politics in the country. Politicians, especially influential ones, often jettison a party to which they have been identified to float or join a new party in the quest to continue his political career. This decision however, is usually preceded by threat to his interest in the party. Interestingly, when such individuals move, they usually move along with their supporters. This automatically translates into a 'we' and 'they' relationship among hitherto members of the same party. Also, the feeling of 'we' and 'they' that has been generated usually transcend the party borders to involve even 'party in the electorate' especially where the party stalwart also exert considerate influence in the society. In this scenario, party activities divide rather than unite the citizens. Indeed, this factor serves to explain the protraction of the crises that rocked Ilorin, the Kwara State capital between 2001 and 2003. The state has since the Second Republic been under the political control of a godfather, Dr. Olushola Saraki, who also exercise considerable influence in the community. However, when his interest became jeopardized within the ANPP in the state, he swiftly decamped to the PDP shortly before the 2003 elections. This obviously created a sharp division not only among party members but also between citizens of the state who had to pitch their tent either with him or with the then governor of the state, Muhammed Alabi Lawal[25]. Consequently, party issue became a major determinant of inter group relation in the state.

Concluding Remarks

Discussions so far has revealed that political parties are *sine qua non* to the existence of any democratic political system because of the roles they play in building consensus and building bridges along several divides. This way they also serve as

effective tool of national integration. Given this fact, one would expect that Nigeria's return to multi party democratic system in 1999 would serve as springboard for achieving the integration of its multifarious ethno cultural and religious group into a stable national community. However, observable trends in the country since 1999 have revealed the contrary. Indeed, it is observed that integration crises in Nigeria rather than abate have continued to magnify as evidenced in various communal and sectional conflicts making wave round the country. Unfortunately, Nigeria's political parties have not helped the situation. It is realized that safe for the period when Nigeria was under colonial rule, political parties in Nigeria have never really assisted the task of national integration. On the contrary, their activities are wittingly and unwittingly reinforcing the integration crises as demonstrated in the text. To this end, value re orientation of Nigerians is suggested so that they would be able to discern issues of national importance from narrow parochial ones. Second, political parties need to make their activities to be in line with existing realities in the country. By given optimal consideration to the complexities and diversities in the country in their actions, they would be doing the nation a great good in its march towards national unity. This equally requires support from the state by enacting enabling laws which would allow parties to re-structure and make their activities to be in line with existing realities of Nigeria. Finally, attitudinal change on the part of all Nigerians is essential if any meaningful progress is to be made in the quest for an integrated and vibrant political entity.

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12. For further details on Nigerian politics at this period see, James Ojiako, *Thirteen Years of Military Rule in Nigeria* (Daily Times Publication, Lagos), 1981; Oyeleye Oyediran, *Nigerian Government and Politics Under the Military* (Macmillan publishers, Ibadan) among others.

13. See Oyeleye Oyediran op cit.; AA Muhammad, 'Muritala-Obasanjo Transition: A Retrospective Analysis' *Ilorin Researcher vol 3.*

14. See, D. O. Alabi, '2003 Elections and the South-West' in HA Saliu, ed. *Nigeria under Democratic Rule (1999 – 2003), Vol. One.* University Press PLC, Ibadan. pp 110 – 135

15. Larry Diamond, Anthony Kirk-Greeneand Oyeleye Oyediran (eds.), *Transition without End: Nigerian Politics and Civil Society under Babangida* (Vantage Publishers, Ibadan) 1997; E. E. Osaghae, *The Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (C Hurst and Company, London), 1998 pp124 - 125

16. Initially at the commencement of the political process in the Third Republic, several political associations applied for registration as political parties but were denied because the government wanted to 'ensure that such political parties as will be registered are not mere offshoots of those of the first and Second Republics…'. Alternatively therefore, the government formed two new parties, the SDP and the NRC and advised politicians to join any of them. For further commentaries on this see, Eghosa Osaghae, *The Crippled Giant... op cit*; Nuhu Yaqub, 'Political Parties in the transition Process' op cit. pp 126-130

17. See Bola Akinterinwa, 'The 1993 Election Imbroglio' in Larry Diamond, Anthony Kirk-Greene and Oyeleye Oyediran (eds.) op cit. pp 278-306

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19. The APP was later to become all Nigerian Peoples' Party (ANPP) shortly before the 2003 elections. It must also be stated that emergence of the three parties, AD, APP and PDP, as the only ones to contest the 1999 general elections was subject to passing a acid test by scoring not less than five (initially ten) percent of the total votes cast in at least 24 states of the federation at the December 1998 local government elections. Of the nine parties given provisional clearance to contest the 1998 elections, only the APP and PDP met this criterion. However, the AD was also registered along due to some politically exigent factors. For further insight on this see, H A Saliu and A A Muhammad, 'Political Parties and Democratic Sustenance in Nigeria' *Ilorin Journal Sociology, vol 2, no. 1*, 2007

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22. The Vice President shortly before the 2007 election process began floated and decamped to the Action Congress under which he contested for the presidency in the April 2007 elections, though he lost to the PDP candidate.

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