POLITICAL PARTIES AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A VERITABLE MEANS OF DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING A HEALTHY POLITICAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The enthronement of democracy in Nigeria on the 29thMay, 1999 after a prolonged military rule had been described as a noble and positive step in the right direction. However, the unfolding negative scenarios in the past and present such as rigging of elections, political assassinations, violence, press war, mistrust, kidnapping, terrorism, and corruption, among other things, have adversely affected the level of political participation among the Nigerian citizenry. The palpable fear is that if care is not taken, the 'beautiful ones' may not be allowed to attain leadership positions and if the trend of the event is not properly checked and managed, mediocre, vagabonds, miscreants, and 'political idiots', may likely emerge as leaders. This is highly detrimental to the development and sustenance of our nascent democracy. Be that as it may, studies have shown that the Nigerian political parties have not done well in stimulating political participation among Nigerian citizens. This paper, therefore, intends to examine the influence of political parties on political participation with the sole aim of highlighting how political parties can improve political education and enhance political participation in Nigerian political space as against political apathy being exhibited by many Nigerians. This study depends on secondary sources of data and political efficacy theory as its theoretical framework of analysis.

Keywords: Political Parties, Political Participation, Democracy, Political System and Nigeria.

Introduction

The importance and the need for political parties and political participation cannot be underestimated in any democratic setting. Their values, tenets, and significance are unquantifiable and indispensable as important tools through which the machinery of the government can guarantee peace, order, and good governance. As observed by Akinlade and Ibitoye (2004:70), without the existence of political parties through mass/popular participation, it would have been practically difficult if not impossible to run the affairs of a State as a result of its nature and complexity. Interestingly too, even in the so-called monarchical societies, there is

high demand for a representative government which is only possible through political parties and mass participation. Thus, political parties and political participation are part of the essential ingredients of democracy that must be mutually complementary (Akinlade and Ibitoye, 2003).

The significance of political parties and political participation has been stressed further in Diamond's (1989:16) conceptualization of democracy. According to him, it is:

"a system of government that meets three essential conditions: meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and groups especially political parties for all effective positions of government power at regular intervals and excluding the use of force, a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair election, such that no major (adult) social group is excluded and a level of civil and political liberties: freedom to form and join organization, sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation"

The above definition by Diamond, therefore, suggest that any claim to democracy by any regime or State must essentially be based on competitive choice, the enjoyment of civil and political liberties which can only be guaranteed through political parties and popular participation by the citizenry in real terms and the accountability of the leadership.

The adoption of the Clifford Constitution of 1922 paved the way for the Legislative Council created in 1923. The Council allocated three (03) seats to Lagos and one (01) seat to Calabar. The three (03) seats in Lagos were won by the returnees from Sierra-Leone and Gambia-Eric Moore, Adeniyi Jones, and Egerton Shyngle. The seat in Calabar was won by a Ghanaian- Atta Awonu (Ayoade, 1997). What was interesting about the election of 1923 was that the people showed a cosmopolitan spirit. They were not parochial and sentimental and even as early as 1923, they paid attention to merit as none of the three (03) elected were from Lagos and the one (01) elected in Calabar was a Ghanaian lawyer practicing in Calabar. This is clear evidence to show that Nigeria started the electoral process on the right note. However, not too long after this historic event, things started to fall apart. The political landscape was unnecessarily heated up by the politicians, some of whom were desperate to win at all cost. In the process, some politicians resulted to uncivilized means such as intimidation, harassment, maiming, and killing of political opponents to sail through. Hence, the failure of the Nigerian government to conduct free and fair

elections at all levels that are all-inclusive and acceptable to both local and international observers as well as the people at home and in the diaspora calls for this research work.

Clarification of Conceptual Terms

Political Party

There is no universally acceptable definition of the term political party but for this paper, we shall attempt some of the definitions as offered by some renowned scholars of great repute.

Edmund Burke, two centuries ago provided the first modern definition of a Political party as a body of men united for promulgating by their joint endeavour the national interest upon some particular principle in which they all agreed. This definition is based upon principle. That is, Burke's idea of a party was that it should ideally exist to serve the needs of all men in the national and not sectional interest. Burke thought that a party that performed as it should was an asset to any nation while a group that pursued a purely selfish course was no better than a faction (Akinlade and Ibitoye, 2004). Shafritz (1988) defined a political party as an organization that seeks to achieve political power by electing members to public offices so that their political philosophies can be reflected in public policies. Rose (1974) in his book titled: 'The Problem of Party Government' defined the political party as an organization concerned with the expression of popular preferences and contesting the control of the chief policy-making of government. This definition, according to him has three important elements namely:

One: Parties are organizations; they differ from different categories of people given the same answer in a public opinion poll.

Two: Parties are concerned with the expression of popular preferences; their activities are thus related to the mass of society as well as to the government.

Three: Parties are concerned with controlling policy-making offices in government.

However, the various definitions given above indicate that a political party is dynamic in nature. Hence, a political party can be described as a group of individuals who share common or similar political opinions, and ideals and whose main aim is to control the machinery of the government and thus, be able to carry out its policies in the State. It is in view of the foresaid that Political Scientists tend to agree that power is the major motivation for people to join a political party. They seek political power either independently or in cooperation with other political parties to

form a government. As Schumpeter pointed out, the first and foremost aim of each political party is to prevail over their contemporaries to get into power or stay in it (Akinlade and Ibitoye, 2004). It is this goal of attaining political power that distinguishes political parties from other groups in the political system.

Political Participation

From Aristotle to Dewey, Political Philosophers/Political Scientists have extolled popular participation as a source of vitality and creative energy as a defense against tyranny and as a means of enacting collective wisdom. Furthermore, political participation is an essential ingredient of every polity, large or small. Whether the society is oligarchic or democratic, someone must make political decisions such as appointing, upholding, and/or removing leaders. Those who failed to participate whether out of neglect or exclusion are likely to enjoy less power than others. Although, not all those who participate possess effective power, but those who do not participate cannot exercise or share power. As these observations imply the right to participate is an essential element of democratic government, inseparable from such other attributes of democracy as consent, accountability, majority rule, equality, popular sovereignty, e. t .c. Indeed, the growth and development of democratic government is in part measured by extension of the suffrage and the correlative rights to hold offices and to associate for political purposes. Whereas traditional monarchies often restrict power and political participation to the nobility and their agents. Democracy has in principle transformed these prerogatives into rights enjoyed by everyone irrespective of one's class.

Having said all this, what does this concept mean? This is necessary because of the desire to avoid confusion and to focus our minds on what we are after. The term political participation can be viewed as those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy. These activities typically include voting, seeking information, discussing and attending meetings, contributing financially, and communicating with representatives (Ezeadi and Asiegbu, 1990). It can also be defined as the process of taking part in political and public affairs which ranges from mere voting at elections and participating in political activities to seeking public offices by presenting oneself as a candidate for elections. Hence, in all democratic societies, political participation often links the government with the governed. Officeholders are elected by the masses and are also accountable

to the people who elected them. At the end of the tenure of office, there are fresh elections in which the electorates either renew the mandate earlier given or remove them (politicians) from offices by voting for new office holders.

Furthermore, Political participation can be defined as "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government actions – either directly by affecting the making of implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who are involved in policy-making" (Verba, Burns, Schlozman, 1995). Voting, volunteering for campaign work, membership in parties, running for office, or protest activities, are all different forms of political participation. Voting is clearly the least intensive and demanding of these activities.

Verba et. al. (1995) identifies the following three factors as predictors of political participation:

    (i)   Resources enabling individuals to participate (time, knowledge);

    (ii)   Psychological engagement (interest, efficacy); and

    (iii)   Recruitment networks help to bring individuals into politics (like social movements, church groups, or parties).

However, there is still a contention among political philosophers, political scientists, statesmen, and public analysts about whether political participation should be opened to all or restricted to those who know how to use it wisely. Some have argued that men are not equally worthy of being consulted about their opinions and that such men should be excluded because of caste, race, religion, poverty, or other presumed marks of irresponsibility and moral deficiency. To them, men who lack property or education have little or no stake in society and are likely to be swayed by demagogues and will use the opportunity to participate merely to register their envy and recalcitrance. Arguments like these lay behind the exclusion of slaves and aliens from Athenian democratic processes (Akinlade, 2004).

Within this tradition emphasized above, Plato as cited in (Akinlade, 2004) did not subscribe to the type of democracy that assumes that everybody is capable of being a leader and therefore allows free voting and competition. He could not see how ordinary citizens could rule himself since he would be preoccupied with the desire to serve his selfish interest. He therefore believes that there was a need to give priority of leadership to the 'wise man' whom he labeled as the 'philosopher king' to direct the affairs of the State. According to him, the 'Philosophical King' is

in constant companionship with the divine order of the world and will reproduce that order in his soul as far as man may become 'god-like'. To him, the recipe for good government is the rule of those who know over those who do not, regardless of the latter's concept. In other words, the rule of the 'cognoscentis' over the 'ignoramuses'.

Nevertheless, as democratic institutions are advancing, the trend has been for such barriers to be dropped. While all citizens can't participate at the same degree as this may not be desirable for obvious reasons earlier mentioned in this discussion for a democratic political system, the majority of the citizens must participate, vote, and take part in political discussions and if necessary to offer their services for elective positions (Dare and Oyewole,1987). Widespread participation is not only peculiar to democracy; even greater emphasis is placed upon participation by the modern mass dictatorship, both communist and fascist States. Their desire to involve every citizen in political affairs is evident not only in their efforts to achieve legitimacy and recognition through unanimous voting in elections but also in the organization of the masses into an elaborate network of youth, groups, mass parties, trade unions, and rallies, among others.

Theoretical Framework: Political Efficacy Theory

This theory is considered very useful and relevant to this paper because there is a strong relationship between political parties and political participation and by implication, it helps to ensure and promote good governance at all levels of government. In an attempt to understand the relationship between political parties and political participation within a given political system, the theory of political efficacy becomes a ready-made instrument through which we can grasp the theoretical foundations and assumptions that form the basis of the existence of the two concepts especially as it relates to their relationship within a political system.

According to Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954), political efficacy is the "belief that political and social change is feasible and that the individual citizen can contribute to this change through participation or involvement in political party activities". Political participation is impacted by the conviction that one's actions have an impact on political processes and results. People who have high political efficacy think that their actions can change the political system and encourage more people to get involved in politics. Low political efficacy, on the other hand, can result in political apathy and reduced engagement. In the same vein, Political efficacy is seen as a necessary social attribute in democratic societies and is seen as a "pre-condition for political

participation and engagement" (Karv, Lindell, and Rapeli, 2022). In Political Science, political efficacy is the degree to which the populace believes that it is within their power to alter the government and that they are capable of comprehending and influencing political issues. It is frequently assessed through surveys and serves as a gauge for the general well-being of civil society. The "feeling that individual action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process" is the definition of the theory, which was first presented by Campbell, Gurin, and Miller during an analysis of voters' behaviour and attitude in the 1952 US presidential election (Campbell Gurin and Miller (1954).

In addition, there are two types of political efficacy: external efficacy, which is the conviction that one can influence politics by understanding them (the politicians) and internal efficacy, which is the conviction that one can influence politics by joining them (political participation) (Balch, 1974). Limited policy responsiveness has been found in investigations of external efficacy (Bernardi, 2020). When it comes to political efficacy, a person's control beliefs are typically influenced by their personal political involvement and participation experiences or their impressions of the political participation experiences of others. In terms of political efficacy, Bandura (1997) makes a distinction between personal and collective efficacy, which reflects the difference between internal and external political efficacy. Self-efficacy in the field of politics is defined as the "belief that one can produce effects through political action". Research studies concerning the increasing disenchantment of greater segments of the populace from the political system in Western democracies have made political efficacy a prominent factor.

The political efficacy of citizens can be demonstrated in several ways, including the media, the freedom to protest, the ability to start petitions and free and fair elections. Low political efficacy in society can have negative consequences such as political cynicism or outright violence stemming from a citizen's sense of helplessness in their own country. Social media platforms provide another way for citizens to demonstrate their political efficacy: "Media use, and news consumption in particular, enhances efficacy, public affairs knowledge, and civic engagement" (Ognyanova and Ball-Rokeach (2015). However, studies have not found a link between voting and public confidence in the government or political leaders, despite the strong correlation between feelings of efficacy, participation, and involvement in social and political life. Policy preferences were found to be polarized by political efficacy. It was discovered that those with

relatively high political efficacy tend to express more extreme   policy preferences, while those with relatively low political efficacy tend to express more moderate policy preferences. These findings came from studies that were both observational and experimental (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, and Halperin, 2013).

The Influence of Political Parties on Political Participation

Party(ies)

Of all the influences on political participation, such as education, culture, access to information, and so on. The party is probably the most potent in modern democracy. The party sometimes resembles the nation or the church both in its symbolic force and in its capacity for arousing affection, devotion, and sacrifice on the part of its loyal members. The party often inspires in its members feelings of belonging while membership in cognate social groups may strengthen party influence on political participation. Indeed, it may also help to solidify attachments to other social groups. This mystique normally keeps a large number of people persistently active even though they have only a slim chance of affecting the outcome of important public events/affairs.

Competition

It simply implies an event in which people or groups of people compete favourably with each other and/or one another in order to find out the best. (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 10th Edition, 2020). Political participation can also be strengthened through competition between political parties. In other words, political participation would be greater and more interesting if the competition between political parties were more intense and conducted healthily. That is, if they are more equally matched in the number of their adherents or more sharply divided in ideologies. Furthermore, ideological cleavage between political parties has the power to increase political participation. This is because those who see the political parties as diverging are more likely to find the election important and will therefore be more strongly motivated to work and vote for their political party.

Campaign

This is the art of politicking. The efforts made by the political parties to involve the electorates in the political contest are concentrated in the campaigns themselves. Campaign techniques are most effective in stimulating citizens' participation in political activities. All forms of persuasion and publicity no doubt have some positive effects, however, minuscule. The most dramatic

results, however, can be achieved through face-to-face communication with potential voters. This contact can be made formally through designated party canvassers or informally through politically interested friends and opinion leaders. The relative effectiveness of these communications depends on their ability to command the attention of the people they seek to contact, to represent themselves as a trustworthy source of information, to enforce morals or psychological pressures, and to convey campaign messages in meaningful languages (Cohen, 1964). In other words, candidates with the strong personal appeal can significantly increase the interest of typical nonparticipants and quicken the favour and activities of party regulars.

Awareness

Experience has shown that political participation is associated with political awareness, that is, actual knowledge of political affairs. The number of citizens who can be described as 'aware' in any sophisticated sense is extremely small. The majority of the electorates are unable to define terms common to ordinary political discourse. For example, 'monopoly', 'plurality', 'left', 'right', 'balance budget', 'surplus budget', 'deficit budget', e.t.c, many cannot even identify the reference group that speaks for their interests. Secondly, they cannot classify themselves accurately as liberal or conservative. Thirdly, they cannot describe the differences between their party and that of the opposition. Thus, the awareness created by the political parties through the use of mass media (radio, television, and newspapers) and local organizations is highly helpful in this situation as it enables them to maintain contact with the relatively politically inactive and leads them to awareness. Awareness also affects both the amount and the quality of political participation. If the unaware participate at all, they tend to do so randomly and inconsistently and may work against their own stated aims and objectives, whereas the politically aware are usually better able to relate their social values to their political opinions, to achieve stable interrelated consistent belief system and to comprehend and act upon the constitutional rule of the game (Closky, 1964).

Issues/Policies

Issues also play a prominent role in political participation. However, voters may lack knowledge of the array of issues/policies being contested for in a given election, especially in less developed countries or the so-called underdeveloped countries where there is little or no access to information. While some are strongly motivated by a single issue or class of salient issues that

affect them, others may not necessarily be bothered. For some purposes, the electorates can be thought of as constituting 'issue public', e.g., Niger - Delta (resource control), the elderly (medical care), free education (the masses), e.t.c. In principle, any issue can be a powerful stimulus to political participation, and in practice, some issues are so narrow, technical, or esoteric that they have little or no chance of capturing the interest of a large public. For example, 'position' issues otherwise referred to as bread-and-butter issues which feature such things as social security, employment, minimum wage, medical care, housing scheme, e.t.c, are generally thought to have better chances of interesting prospective voters than 'style' or 'symbolic' issues which stress such things as civil liberties, foreign policy questions, among others, because they are presumably more complex and abstract and hence, less compelling. By and large, political parties often translate issues into terms that everybody understands both the educated and uneducated in order to create interest in political participation.

Socialization and Mobilization

The ability of political parties to activate electorates through public debates, discussions, e.t.c, sometimes helps to increase the scope of political activities and widen popular political participation. The issues political parties choose to focus on or articulate sometimes become part of the large political curiosity. These activities may be restricted to election periods with various methods of increasing the party's supporters. However, they may extend far beyond electoral propaganda and the parties may seek to mobilize support by channeling supporters' non-political activities, hence, the involvement of the majority in political activities has a major influence on the development of the citizen's sense of political competence or efficiency (Akinlade & Ibitoye, 2004).

The Nigerian Experience

The match towards democracy in Nigeria, though partial began in 1922 through the introduction of the elective principle introduced by the Clifford Constitution in that particular year and the subsequent introduction of party politics based on ethnicity. Ethnic politics has no doubt affected our reasoning faculty and this has led to a major problem affecting our political orientation and development. Ever since the introduction of the elective principles, the major ones being the elections of 1959,1964,1979,1983,1991,1993,1999,2003,2007,2011,2015,2019, and 2023. Each election has its peculiar characteristics as regards the level of participation and success. For

example, the 1993 presidential election was widely adjudged to be the freest and fairest election in the annals of the political history of Nigeria. Yet, it was annulled by the then-head of the military junta, President Ibrahim Babangida. This costly mistake has made some Nigerians vow never to participate in politics. Besides, kidnapping, terrorism, bribery and corruption, violence, and so on, have become rampant such that it is very difficult, if not impossible to draw a line between the Nigerian State and the 'Hobbesian' state of affairs where each party is in war with one another in an attempt to gain political power by any means (Omonijo, 2006). While stressing the dangers inherent in political assassination and attacks, Nwolise (2006) asserted that political assassination negatively impacts on the nation's image, make nonsense of the economic fortunes of Nigeria by frightening away foreign investors, tourists, and Nigerians in the diaspora who are constantly being encouraged by the government to come and invest in the county. In addition, the general election of 2007 went down memory lane as one of the worst elections ever held in Nigeria as it was marred with some grave irregularities. For example, former President Olusegun Obasanjo publicly declared during one of the electioneering campaigns that 'Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) would meet violence with violence' (Ifeandi, 2007).

Furthermore, various studies have shown that individual information, efficacy, political concern, and participation are a function of many factors. Such factors as the level of modernization and industrial value, social cleavages in terms of economic cultural/ethnic differences, level of inequality, education, constitutional frameworks, and pressure groups/interest groups (Olaniyan,2007).

Sincerely speaking, the political parties in Nigeria have failed in discharging their historic and primary responsibilities and this is due to leadership challenges, the characters involved, environmental factors, constitutional problems, military mentality, and so on and the resultant effects are political apathy, bad governance and/or poor service delivery as opposed to what is obtainable in the Western democracies of the world.

Conclusion

Man can be described as being free only if they share in the determination of their affairs. This is only possible through a vibrant political system and mass participation. On this premise, it is clear from the above analysis that the two elements, that is, political parties and political participation cannot be treated with levity. Hence, in a democracy, political participation is

power, and therefore, rulers cannot afford to ignore the needs and interests of the participants. Widespread apathy may likely increase the chances that political parties and/or government will be highly dominated by men who are unresponsive, self-aggrandizing, and unscrupulous. Participation, on the other hand, reminds those who govern that they must attend to their duties and obligations and serve the electorates effectively. Whenever political apathy prevails, it becomes difficult to organize and maintain political opposition as an essential ingredient of the defence against tyranny and the abuse of political power. Thus, political participation not only stimulates political learning but also heightens responsibility, deepens and widens awareness, and increases one's sense of political efficacy and effectiveness. Succinctly put, political participation is a reflection and function of leadership, party(ies), beliefs, attitudes, norms, values, and ideals that are relevant to the growth development, and sustenance of a healthy political system in a given society.

Suggestions

There is no doubt about the fact that democracy remains the best form of government where the rights and interests of every citizen are expected to be guaranteed and protected. This can only be done through a widespread habit of tolerance, political maturity, and compromise among the members of the political community at all times irrespective of their political party's affiliation and political ideologies.

In addition to this, for the seed of democracy to germinate in this country, certain qualities must be encouraged to be displayed among the political class, the State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC), the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and other relevant bodies who are stakeholders in the electoral process. These qualities include individual characters, unselfish devotion to the public interest, respect for the rule of law, respect for all democratic norms/values, and strict adherence to the constitution of the land. This will help to reduce the fierce and desperate struggle or battle to attain political positions and political apathy.

There is a need for public enlightenment which aims at enhancing popular participation in the art of governance. The electorates must understand the value of the exercise of their votes. They should use that power to unseat a President, a Governor, or a Legislator. They may be brainwashed that they can use that power to make the high and mighty fall and crumble. It is

only when we start realizing the enormity of the power of votes that we begin to appreciate and cherish it.

Lastly, politics is service and as such, it is imbued with ethics. For this reason, there is no alternative for the people to embrace a political ethics that places service above self and that respect the rule of ethics as essential components of politics as service. It is when the process is fair and open that the outcome is most likely to be judged fair and acceptable to all.

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