

Democratization, Party Politics and Leadership Crisis in Nigeria

Ewelie C. Justice, PhD, John-Adegbesan Ekwi, PhD

University of Port Harcourt

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2023.7807>

Received: 26 July 2023; Revised: 10 August 2023; Accepted: 14 August 2023; Published: 28 August 2023

ABSTRACT

In trying to interrogate the notion that the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership vis a vis the nature and character of party politics, this paper focuses on the interplay between internal party politics which determines to a large extent the quality of elected leaders and the perennial leadership crisis in Nigeria. The paper is basically structured on data collected from secondary sources, which provides analytical insight that the unhealthy political party culture in Nigeria bears to a large degree the seed of leadership crisis in Nigeria. This study argued that the interplay of unhealthy internal party politics and the crisis of leadership in Nigeria have contributed largely to the underdevelopment of the Nigerian state and further widened the scope of divisive politics in Nigeria. In this regard, it is recommended that with a strong and independent electoral management body empowered by law will be a panacea to entrenching healthy political culture amongst political parties and political actors, which will invariably lead to improved leadership selection process thereby addressing the scourging effect of bad leadership.

Keywords: Political Party, Internal Party Politics, Electoral Law, Democracy, Political Culture

INTRODUCTION

The practice of politics is universal and as such transcends across culture, age, but its nature, application and pattern varies across existing political culture which may change with time. It is imperative to note that politics in any society is inherently marked by power contestation, power allocation, resource control and distribution, policy formulation and implementation. The nature and pattern of this contestation is largely influenced by the existing political culture of a given society and this is determined by the character of the political actors. Political culture is therefore the ground norms, values, belief and general attitude system that shapes the political structure of any given society, hence, a major dimension of leadership crisis can be traced to the socio-cultural values of that society. This complex matrix of basic principles, ideas and values provides the foundation by which a society is governed. In effect, the apparent breakdown of social conscience and social responsibility bears in it the seed of bad leadership.

Since the inception of independent Nigeria, the Nigerian state has over the years experienced keen contestation among political actors over power, resources and other socio-economic benefits. As captured by Jega (2007) since the outset of what Huntington referred as the 'third wave of democratization' in the early 1970's, the intellectual preoccupation with the concept and institutions of democracy has increased dramatically; particularly in Africa, where a long history of brutal authoritarian – especially military rule and its systematic displacement have raised serious concerns on the process of democratization and its inherent leadership crisis.

Arthur (2005) further asserts that when poverty of contemporary African leaderships, military gangsterism, ill-articulated, badly focused and poorly executed developmental programmes, a crippling debt burden, environmental and ecological disasters are added to these other incapacities, the picture that emerges is that of a country unsure of itself and uncertain about its future.

Unfortunately as espoused by Ake (1994), the political space in Nigeria is mostly illiberal, not desirably

participatory, and barely representative and constrained by lack of accountability and bad governance. He further stated that many cases of transition to democracy in Africa have produced democracy without democrats and one without democratic dividends. While the main purpose of democracy is that of broadening political space, the political environment in Nigeria is highly exclusive and restrictive owed majorly to the character and functions of political parties vis a vis the ruling elite.

DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN NIGERIA

The idea of democracy crystallized from the quest to end absolutism of leaders over their people and society which culminated in the emergence of popular sovereignty and representative government. In effect, democracy is intended at a broad-based (popular) and active participation of citizens in the affairs of the state as such every democratic society thrives on the unfettered rights of citizens in choosing their representatives at elections. Thus, all modern democracies are identified by popular participation of the people. Scholars like Badru (2005), Im (2005), Babawale (2006), Jega (2007), Mimiko (2007), and Oddih (2007) have all underlined the imperative of democracy to good governance and development.

Accordingly, Kaldor and Vejvoda (2002) simply define democracy as a set of formal institutions and a way of equitable redistribution of power through popular participation; it is therefore through the aggregation of these expectations and its realization that democracy is expected to advance the interest of the people. Democracy as a desirable form of government aims to promote development and good governance especially in plural societies founded on principles that are consistent with human rights and fundamental freedom of citizens (Mimiko, 2007). Consequently, in underscoring the conditions for any society to be regarded as democratic, Dahl in Gberevbie (2014), argues that the existence of civil liberties, political participation, political pluralism are enabling conditions defining democratization. Similarly, Badru (2005), states that democracy represents, first and foremost, an increase in citizen political equality in terms of popular participation. Instructively, democracies world over are threatened by a closed up political spaces more so when the state is ethnically and religiously plural.

In situating democracies in a more complex and plural society like Nigeria, Jega (2007) argues that where nation-states are large, covering extensive territories and population, and often ethnically and religiously plural, if not linguistically, modern formulations of democracy place less emphasis on direct popular participation, as much emphasis is placed on personal liberty, popular sovereignty and representative government with entrenched checks and balances to curtail the abuse of power. It is therefore this lack of checks and balances to curtail the abuse of power that has plagued the democratization process in Nigeria.

Hence, Nigeria's democracy has been too weak, fragile and fluctuating since independence, and with a loose unity drawing together of over 250 ethnic nationalities by the British colonialists and a sharp religious divide, Nigeria continues to be enmeshed in the murky waters and grapples with the quest towards democratization which prior to the fourth republic was accentuated by series of military coup. As a result of the insatiable quest for power and the struggle to appropriate public good for private advantage, Nigeria is at best a democracy without democrats. As Jega (2007) rightly noted, for Nigeria political class leveraging on the existing fault lines, democracy is hardly desirable if it means popular empowerment of the masses, democracy is only desirable, if it can facilitate access to power, create a window of opportunity to loot public treasury and keep the people in constant control and domination.

In furthering this dominance and profiting from Nigeria's socio-cultural, ethnic and religious differences, elections in Nigeria have in their nature been highly divisive along these fault lines thereby promoting the politics of exclusion. As expected democracy thrives on inclusivity and political awareness, as such democracy cannot be expected to promote the interest of the people adequately if the people are not fully involved in government as a result of their lack of political education. Democracy and democratization been

the process of institutionalizing the principles and tenets of democracy are only robust to the extent to which elections are free and fair. In underlining the primacy of elections to the process of democratization, Ewelie & Eze (2023) argues that elections provides citizens with an opportunity to enter into a social contract with their leaders and through a free and fair ballot elect those who will represent them in government for the purposes of policy formulation and implementation so as reflect their yearnings and aspiration through the political parties.

PARTY POLITICS IN NIGERIA

Competitive politics is the bedrock upon which democracy thrives in any society. It is therefore a given that democracy is practically unattainable without a well-established political party, thus, political party forms the nexus between the administration of the state, the aspiration of the political elites on the one hand and expression of choice of voters through election on the other hand. Political parties are therefore formed as a necessity in any democratic society as structures by which voters make political choices as to whom is elected to govern. Accordingly, Neumann (1956) defines political party as an organization of society's active political agents who compete for popular support with another group of persons holding diverse political views. This implies that political parties are formed based on ideologies and it is this ideology that drives the policy thrust of government and determines whether a political party is liberal or conservative.

Thus, the term political party is commonly associated with all organized groups seeking to acquire and exercise power, aggregate interest, mobilise and rally support for the candidates they offer for election into public offices, hence, Burke (2001), captures a political party as that body of men united by common purpose in promoting the joint endeavour of national interest based on particular principles which they all agree upon. It is this collective principle within a political party that scholars now commonly refer to as internal party democracy. It in this light that Simba (2011) posited that for any political party to be relevant in a democratic society, activities and decisions of such party must be influenced by the values of internal democracy.

Furthermore, the principle of internal party democracy has direct bearing on how candidates are selected, leaders emerge, policies are formulated and source of funding for party activities. So, it is critical that the internal arrangement, structure and coordination of political parties reflect democratic principles. Sadly, the history of political party in Nigeria is ridden with anti democratic practices and faced with enormous challenges amongst which are sectional, self seeking and dictatorial posturing, the scourge of godfatherism and the imposition of candidates, party indiscipline, violence, thuggery and money bag politics.

Consequently, as rightly observed by Omodia (2006), the lack of internal party democracy, ethnicization of party politics, poor political leadership, party indiscipline, lack of clear cut party ideologies and the politicization of key institutional guards like the police, judiciary, election management body and civil society are glaring weaknesses of the anti-democratic influence of political parties in Nigeria's development trajectory. Interestingly, the formation of political parties in Nigeria has been largely influenced by parochial interest of acquiring power for selfish interest rather the acquisition of power for the redistribution of social good and justice. As a result, political contest has been greatly marred by malpractices, as the struggle to win and control state power is seen as an avenue or advantage by the ruling elites for personal gain (Oddih, 2007).

Hence, since the acquisition of power in Nigeria grants unfettered access to national wealth and determines who gets the most of what there is to get in any political community, being a member of a ruling political party becomes rewarding and very juicy. As a result, political membership has been very fluid and as Mbah (2011), Abimbola & Adesite (2012) notes defection or cross-carpeting which is commonplace or feature amongst Nigeria political actors connotes the irrational and unstable movement from mostly an opposition

party to a ruling party or from a ruling party as a result of limited access to power or denial of party ticket an alternative platform. The effect of this scourge therefore makes it almost impossible to ascertain a true member of a particular party prompting Liebowitz & Ibrahim (2013) to state thus that “party membership is ephemeral as people engage in the political process for selfish reasons”, thus, the determining factor is the party that offers the closest access to the corridors of power, this goes to underscore that party membership in Nigeria has been minimally influenced by democratic principles and ideology.

LEADERSHIP CRISIS IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is daunted with a myriad of challenges, amongst which is the perennial leadership crisis. Over the years, Nigeria’s grave leadership crisis has generated a growing body of analyses trying to situate the cause and effect of leadership failure and its cost implication on democratization in Nigeria. As social capital continues to dwindle from one administration to another, the subject has been considerably and vigorously sustained. In contextualizing the political leadership conundrum in Africa, Ake (1996) notes that the current crisis in Africa will never be understood as much as the problem is construed to be an economic crisis, he further argues that not only is the crisis essentially political in character, it is also political in origin.

Consequently, Achebe (1989) notes that the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership, the unwillingness or inability of its political leadership to rise to the responsibility and live up to the challenges of personal example. So in effect, one finds major obstacle such as social values and practices that are inimical to democratization and good governance as the driving force in the political turf of Nigeria. In his assessment, Asante (1991) asserts that on the whole, Nigeria’s political elites are not primarily concerned with strengthening the instruments of democratization but are basically concerned with the idea of self perpetuation of power. This was aptly captured by Mamdani (1995) in asserting that many members of Nigeria’s ruling class rather than facilitating democracy, actually do more than dam the waters of democratic and social reform. Hence, the political ruling elites continue to stiffen themselves against the sensitive demands of the people, loot the national treasury, export portions of the booty to foreign vaults, escape with the remainder to their ethnic homeland and firmly appease the starving majority with rhetoric (Kalu cited in Amadi 2014).

Increasingly, as policy formulation and implementation tilts towards the ruling elites, the intensification of power struggle becomes so absorbing that it overshadows even the corporate political survival, a core of statehood and as Maduekwe (1993) succinctly described it, Nigeria politicians like the proverbial dog, will chase every bone irrespective of the consequences thereof. This prompted Ake (1991) to rhetorically question thus, “why should African leaders, or any other leader for that matter, embark on a course of social distribution and transformation just because it is good for his country, if it is bad for his own political survival. This parochial interest and intense struggle for state capture has therefore resulted in the escalation of non democratic tendencies which has further alienated the masses from the ruling elites.

In what appears to be a reinforced pattern of domination that further weakens democratic institutions and deepens political apathy gap as a result of increased voter ignorance, lack of political education and disenfranchisement; the power of citizens’ participation at choosing their representatives through a free and fair election has weaned. As a result of the monetization of power politics and the use of violence as a means of state capture, political actors in Nigeria have turned politics into a dirty game and with the increasing culture of corruption and inefficiency, the ruling elites have failed to perform their roles in the society resulting the emergence of leadership failure.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

Increasingly, as political parties fail to provide the needed democratic structure for leadership selection

process, the crisis of leadership in Nigeria has continues to gain traction, thus as an imperative for the success and survival of any organization, the problem with the Nigeria society has been squarely that of bad and ineffective leadership. Unfortunately, partisan democratic competitions in Nigeria continues to lean towards divisive socio-cultural cleavages and sectional prejudices, while Nigerians have come to accept that the desperation for power and that its appurtenances would always make politicians to identify with these fault lines, political survival must not be sacrificed on the altar of our collective survival as a country. The manipulation of these ethno-religious biases continues to shape Nigeria's fault-lines and has contributed adversely to Nigeria's political instability and leadership crisis.

As a result of the weaponization of ethnic, religious and sectional biases, Nigeria ruling elites have found an easy but dangerous loophole in entrenching themselves to power and ripping off the vast voting population leaving a visible map of a distraught society. In effect, the problem of Nigeria is the weakening of key democratic institutions like the police, judiciary, legislature, and election management body, the rule of law and the polarization and infiltration of civil society, thus, when institutions of government are weak and are unable to reign the power of the state on its citizens (rule and the ruled), the greedy and insatiable quest for absolute power by political actors becomes very inimical to good leadership.

In taking into cognizance the strength of existing laws in Nigeria and particularly the 2022 Nigeria electoral act, the politicization of laws and its enforcement has been the greatest bane, and as such, the implementation of laws are at the whims and caprices of the of the ruling elite worsened by the shift in the internal balance of power between the organs of government in favour of the executive. A far reaching solution to addressing this intricately complex crisis of leadership in Nigeria will require the independence of arms of government and key institutions of state in terms of funding and control.

REFERENCES

1. Achebe, C. (1989). *The trouble with Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers)
2. Ake C. (1994) *Democratization of disempowerment in Africa*. Lagos Malthouse CASS Occasional Monograph, No I
3. Ake, C. (1991). *Rethinking Democracy in Africa*, *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 2, No 1. Pp. 32-44
4. Ake, C. (1992). *Devaluing Democracy*, *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 3. No. 3. Pp. 33-37
5. Ake, C. (1994). *Democratization of Disempowerment in Africa*. Lagos: Malthouse CASS Occasional Monograph, No. 1.
6. Arthur C. N. (2005). *Before We Lose Nigeria – Selected Speeches* Vol. 2. Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd. Enugu Nigeria.
7. Asante, S. K. B. (1991). *African Development: Adebayo Adedeji's Alternative Strategies*.
8. Attahiru M. J. (2007): *Democracy, Good Governance and Development in Nigeria- critical essays* spectrum books limited Ibadan
9. Badru, F. A. (2005). *Patriarchy and constraints of democratic political space of women in Nigeria*. *Unilag Journal of Politics*, 2: 77–101.
10. Dahl in Gberevbie (2014). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
11. Ewelie C. J. & Eze P. (2023). *New Electoral Act in Nigeria, Democracy and Challenges and Prospects for Free, Fair and Credible Elections*, IJRSS.
12. Gberevbie, D. (2014). "Democracy, Democratic Institutions and Good Governance in Nigeria", *EASSRR*, Vol. XXX No I.
13. Im, H. (2005). *Democratic consolidation and democratic governance: 21st century South Korean democracy in comparative perspective*. Background paper prepared for the Sixth Global Forum on Reinventing Government, South Korea, 24 –27 May 2005.
14. Kaldor, M. & I. Vejvoda. (2002). *Democratization in Central and Eastern European Countries: An Overview*. In Kaldor, M. and Vejvoda, I. (Eds.), *Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe*, pp.

- 1–24. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
15. Kalu, V. E. (1987) *The Nigerian Condition: Arthur Nwankwo's Viewpoints and Blueprints* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers)
 16. Liebowitz, J. & Ibrahim, J. (2013) *A Capacity Assessment of Nigerian Political Parties*. NNDP Nigeria.
 17. Maduekwe, O. (1993) "A Nation on the Brink" *African Concord* (October, Special Edition)
 18. Mamdani, M. (1995) "Critique of the State and Civil Society Paradigm in African Studies", in Mamdani, M. And Wamba-dia-Wamba, E.eds., *African Studies in Social Movement and Democracy* (Dakar: CODESRIA Book Series)
 19. Mbah, P. (2011) Party defection and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria, 1999-2009. *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(23)
 20. Mimiko, F. N. O. (2007). Political and constitutional reforms. In Saliu, H., Amali, E. and Olawepo, R. (Eds.), *Nigeria's reform programme: Issues and challenges*, pp. 303– 316. Ibadan: Vantage Publishers.
 21. Oddih, M. (2007). Electoral fraud and the democratic process: Lessons from the 2003 elections. In Jega, A. and Ibeanu, O. (Eds.), *Elections and the future of democracy in Nigeria*, pp. 147–185. Abuja: Nigerian Political Science Association.
 22. Omodia, S.M. (2006). Political leadership and democratic survival in the Nigerian fourth republic. *Indian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 2(2), 283 – 288.
 23. Omodia, S.M. (2007). Governance and democratization in Africa: the Nigerian experience. *The Social Science*, 2(2), 134 – 138.
 24. Simba, S.K. (2011) *Internal Governance Structures of Political Parties in Democratic Governance* Paper Presented at the 1st EAC Consultative Meeting for Political Parties in East Africa held 15-16th September in Nairobi Kenya.