

TWO DECADES OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

Between Consolidation and Regression

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ABSTRACT

The year 1999 marked a watershed moment in the political history of Nigeria with the transition from military to civilian rule and the beginning of the Fourth Republic. Two decades later, the country has not only witnessed the longest period of civilian democratic rule but has also achieved a milestone with the alternation of power between the two dominant political parties. The augury, however, points to a democracy oscillating between consolidation and regression. This paper therefore interrogates two decades of democratisation in Nigeria in the context of the two main parties, the conduct of elections, and the level of representation of marginalised groups, particularly women. The paper contends that while it may be uncharitable to discount the incremental gains since the return to civil rule, the country is far from attaining the status of a consolidated democracy.

Keywords: political party, elections, democratisation, consolidation, regression, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Today, we are taking a decisive step on the path of democracy. We will leave no stone unturned to ensure sustenance of democracy because it is good for us, it is good for Africa, and it is good for the world.

(Presidential Inauguration speech, 29 May 1999)

On 29 May 2022, Nigeria marked 23 years since the return to democracy. This is the longest spell of civilian administration, 62 years after independence; compared to the three previous republics it is a milestone. The First Republic lasted for six years, the Second Republic lasted four years and three months, while the Third Republic was truncated after the presidential election on 12 June 1993 was cancelled by the military. During these 23 years, democracy has been on trial with varying degree of triumphs and mounting challenges. Until recently, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the erstwhile governing party, was considered disorganised and conflict-ridden. The factionalisation within the PDP gave impetus to the All Progressives Congress (APC), formed in 2013, to win the national elections in 2015. However, nine years since its formation and after almost eight years as the governing party, the APC has shown that it is different only in name from the party it succeeded. Virtually all the ills that led to Nigerians railing against the PDP administration and its eventual ouster from power now assail the governing APC (Ayoade, 2019). A report by the Centre for Democracy and Development marking the fifth anniversary of President Buhari's ascension to office, and 21 years of unbroken democracy, stated that:

Under President Buhari's leadership, the APC has demonstrated the same toxic behaviours and corrupt norms that have characterised Nigeria's post-1999 electoral politics. Its modus operandi both in governing and while campaigning is indistinguishable from its predecessor. The APC has laundered the reputations of many corrupt politicians, some of whom President Buhari has personally endorsed and even campaigned alongside.

(Centre for Democracy and Development 2020, p. 6)

This comparison is hardly incontrovertible as it is difficult to distinguish the governing party from the party it displaced from office in terms of philosophical outlook, ideological orientation or moral values. While the PDP has been in existence since 1998 and was the governing party at the beginning of the transition to democracy in 1999, the APC was formed when four prominent opposition parties merged in order to confront the erstwhile governing party.

Neither of the parties is organic in origin, neither do they espouse any compelling vision that can serve as rallying point to unite members. It is therefore not surprising when they display similar characteristics in terms of their organisational structure and the pattern/dimensions in which internal conflicts manifest and are handled (Adebayo 2006; Agbaje 2010; Simbine 2014).

One area where the country has witnessed both continuity and change in the last two decades has been in the conduct of elections. Historically, electoral contests

in Nigeria have been fierce, riddled with tensions, violence, mass rigging, thuggery and intimidation. This is understandable given the narrow conception of political power as an instrument for primitive accumulation and state capture. This ugly political behaviour continued into the Fourth Republic, where candidates are routinely imposed on party members and the electorate by 'godfathers', while rigging and the falsification of votes remain pervasive (Akinboye 2004; Olaniyan 2020). However, some reforms brought about incremental improvements in the management of elections, starting with the 2011 general election. These reforms were deepened in 2015, leading to the defeat of an incumbent president and a well-entrenched political party. The country witnessed a regression in the conduct of the 2019 general election which was adjudged by local and international observers to have fallen below the standards attained in 2015 (European Union Observer Report 2019).

In terms of inclusive representation in the last two decades, very little progress has been made as women, who make up half of the population, continue to be marginalised in flagrant disregard of the country's national gender policy (NGP). This policy recommends that at least 35% of both elective and appointive positions in public service be reserved for women (NGP 2006). Men constitute a larger percentage of party membership and so tend to dominate the party hierarchy, and thus influence who gets what and how, including who flies the party banner at elections.

Despite these limitations democracy remains the preferred form of government among Nigerians, according to surveys conducted by Afrobarometer (Lewis 2006; Mattes 2019). In a democratic society, citizens can freely denounce bad governance and can look forward to exercising their franchise every four years. According to the Fund for Peace (2020) in its index on fragile states in Africa, better-governed countries are democracies. While the form and structures of democracy have been established, its contents and substance such as respect for the rule of law, and open, inclusive and accountable government, remain works in progress.

The trajectory of two decades of democracy in Nigeria points to a system vacillating between consolidation and regression. This paper is therefore an overview of two decades of democratisation in Nigeria within the context of the two dominant parties that have presided over the affairs of the country at national level. It also analyses the general conduct and management of the six national elections held during this dispensation, and the level of representation of marginalised groups, particularly women.

The paper is divided into five sections: an introduction which provides a general background; the second section discusses the origin and nature of the PDP and APC, the two dominant political parties; the third section carries a snapshot of continuity and change as these relate to general elections conducted since

1999; the fourth section discusses the quest for inclusion and the representation of marginalised groups, particularly women; and the paper concludes with the fifth and final section.

POLITICAL PARTY FORMATION IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

In order to understand the origin and nature of the two major parties in Nigeria, the study situates them within the broad category of various political parties in the literature. In an effort to capture the essential features of political parties in different eras and regions of the world, scholars have developed varying typologies. Maurice Duverger (1954), for instance, distinguished between what he called cadre parties, which are led by individuals with high socio-economic status, and the mass party, which according to him mobilises a broad segment of members through the development of a large and complex organisation. He also identified what he termed the devotee party which is tied to a particular charismatic party leader (Anifowoshe 2004). Otto Kirchheimer (1966) advanced four types of party models, namely bourgeois parties, class-mass parties, denominational mass parties, and catch-all-parties (in Gunther & Diamond 2003).

Katz and Mair (1995) identified what they called the cartel party in which public financing of political parties and the expanded role of the state induce parties primarily to seek to perpetuate themselves in power and avail themselves of these resources. Gunther and Diamond (2003) identified 15 different variants of political parties and categorised them into three broad spectrums, based on the nature of the party organisation: whether it is elite based or mass based, and the programmatic orientation of the parties; whether they are ideological or clientele-oriented; and their behavioural norm, whether pluralistic and democratic or hegemonic in outlook and operation.

The organisational model of a political party and its founding context will have an enduring imprint on the basic nature of a political party for decades unless reforms take place. Thus, parties founded by powerful elites may remain under the domination and grip of such elites until a majority of members cease to be deferential to such elites and challenge their authority. The PDP and APC in Nigeria manifest the features of bourgeois and cartel-based parties founded by coalitions of notable political figures, with memberships that cover the ethnic and religious divide of the country. Their social base is broad and heterogeneous and the objective at inception for each of them was to become as inclusive and diverse as possible by allocating party positions and government offices in accordance with proportional and consociational formulas. For both parties, the organisational arrangement at the national level is replicated at the state and local government levels.

People's Democratic Party

In terms of its founding context, the PDP was conceived in 1998 not as a political party but as a nationalist movement. Its precursor, the Group of 34 (G-34), was a nationalist pressure group protesting against military dictatorship in general and the ambition of General Sani Abacha in particular, in his attempt to perpetuate his rule by transforming from being a military head of state into a civilian leader. G-34 was made up of almost the entire political elite which had coalesced in a bi-partisan front calling on the military junta to relinquish power. The sudden demise of General Abacha shortly after the formation of this group, and their declaration allowing him a credible transition, forced the military to hurriedly announce a transition to civilian rule.

The current democratic dispensation therefore emerged from the activism of pro-democracy movements and this group of opinion leaders constituted themselves into a pressure group called the G34. In 1998 most of the members of this group transformed into the People's Democratic Party which became the dominant and governing party between 1999 and 2015 (Anifowoshe 2004; Agbaje, Akande & Ojo 2018). The founding members envisioned the PDP as a pan-Nigerian political party strong enough to challenge military intervention in the country's politics and to drive national development. The party was in reality an amalgam and constellation of a motley group, ranging from the conservatives, pseudo-progressives, military apologists and outright powermongers angling for power and patronage (Gana 2000; Simbine 2002, 2014).

This was a mixed bag of members with diverse political backgrounds representing contrasting political convictions who refused to dissolve their distinct identities in order to produce an organic party, but were united in their determination to put an end to military rule and then take over the reins of power. The commitment to end military rule did not automatically translate to a commitment to the finer ideals of democracy. The bourgeois and cartel nature of the party also encouraged the development of factions and groups delicately positioned within the party, and there was fierce competition for various opportunities and positions that became available (Agbaje 2010; Ashindorbe & Nathaniel 2019). In his assessment of the origin and character of the party on whose platform he emerged as president, Olusegun Obasanjo described the PDP as 'A dynamic amalgam of interest groups held together by, if anything at all, the fact that the party is in power and therefore the resultant strong expectation of patronage' (Anifowoshe 2004, p. 65).

All Progressives Congress

The current governing party in Nigeria, the All Progressives Congress (APC),

is not exactly the progressive party the name suggests. The APC was formed in 2013 when four major opposition parties merged with the sole aim of challenging the hegemony of the then governing party, the PDP. The APC also suffers from the same defects and incongruence that characterise the PDP. Like the party it displaced from office, whose main aim was to stop the military from perpetuating itself in office, evidence suggests that the overriding drive in the formation of APC was to have a platform strong enough to challenge the hegemony of the PDP and not necessarily to provide a credible alternative. The founding members are typical political demagogues and political grandees, adept at propaganda with little in the way of substance and performance. The party claims to be left of centre in the ideological spectrum; but in reality, it is at best a motley crowd with discernible elements of both progressivism and conservatism.

The APC lacks internal cohesion and has been unable to fuse its legacy parties and situate the party as a credible platform. The leadership of the party and members in government subscribe to much the same political opportunism as its predecessor, the PDP (Ashindorbe & Nathaniel 2019). The national consensus on the need for an alternative platform to challenge the dominance of the PDP in 2015 may have overshadowed the glaring dysfunctions and internal contradictions of now governing party. The goodwill and groundswell of support that propelled it to electoral victory happened to coincide with a competent and reform-minded electoral management body that was ready to deliver on its mandate. It is important to state that this massive goodwill is fast dissipating as the party's performance in office has been underwhelming.

Early in its rule as the governing party, there was controversy over the choice of which of the four original factions should produce the leadership and principal officers in the legislature. This depicts the APC as undisciplined and as a party of convenience whose members are only concerned with sharing the spoils of electoral conquest. The party failed to recover from that early false start throughout its first term in office. The views of two associate fellows of the Africa Programme at Chatham House capture the essence and origin of the APC. They argued that the party is an 'uneasy alliance of autonomous elite networks bound together by little more than incumbency and a collective desire to stay in power through 2023 and beyond' (Page & Tayo 2018, p. 6). Also, a report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2018, p. 10) on the state of the two main political parties in Nigeria stated that:

... Little distinguishes Nigeria's two main political parties – the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) party and the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP)... . Both are constellations of fluid national, state, and local elite networks. Both are almost identically structured,

non-ideological organizations. Both rely on misappropriated public funds to finance election campaigns. Neither values internal party democracy, allowing money and high-level interference to corrupt candidate selection processes.

Regardless of this inchoate and apparent dysfunction, what is undeniable is that the emergence of two dominant parties has sharpened the role of the parties as strategic institutions for the survival of Nigeria's democratic aspirations. The Nigerian political system has demonstrated greater resilience and delivered more credible democratic transitions of power on this occasion when the polity gravitates around a two-party formation. The PDP and the APC have become pillars for the nurture and sustenance of the country's collective optimism in democracy and good governance, and have acquired a historic mission and importance that transcends their present faults.

CONDUCT AND MANAGEMENT OF ELECTION FALLOUT

Elections in transitional democracies and deeply divided societies like Nigeria are often fraught with animosity and violence, failing in the process to satisfy the test of legitimacy. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has successfully organised six national elections, in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 respectively, with the seventh due in February 2023.

The majority of these elections were characterised by widespread malpractice, rigging, ballot box stuffing, vote buying, maiming and fatalities (Egwu, Leonard & Matlosa 2009; Bekoe 2011; Shehu 2019). Violence during elections is designed to disable and disrupt the opposing party in order to prevail at the polls, to vitiate the election altogether by undermining the integrity of the results, or to influence voting behaviour through threats and intimidation (Albert 2011). The pervasive nature of violence is not peculiar to the current democratic dispensation in Nigeria. Election-related violence and fatalities are a central theme that runs through the history of Nigeria from the time of independence. The collapse of the First and Second Republics was partly attributed to disputed electoral outcomes that resulted in the expression of various forms of violence, such as the destruction of properties, maiming and killings, which necessitated military intervention (Ashindorbe 2018).

While democratic elections should ideally serve as mechanisms for peace-building, more often than not they trigger violent conflict. Because of the zero-sum disposition of key actors and the weaponisation of ethnic and religious differences in Nigeria, every election tends to complicate the process of national cohesion and threatens the very existence of the state (Osaghae 2020). For this reason, elections

mean more than the routine or regular periodic exercise liberal democracies presume them to be. Paradoxically, the persistence of election violence, the threat to life and monumental malpractices have not exerted any decisive impact in discouraging citizens from seeking participation in the electoral process. They continue to show their conviction in the ballot box as the means of leadership succession (Lewis 2006; Mattes 2019).

The literature on this topic indicates that the underlying drivers of election violence may be traced to the nature of the state and the politicisation of ethnic identities. The rentier and prebendal character of the Nigerian state has for decades been the site for violent, zero-sum electoral competition among the factional political elite who scheme to gain access to and control of the vast economic power that public office confers (Joseph 1999; Ashindorbe 2018). The political mobilisation and weaponisation of ethnic and religious identities are also implicated and tend to fuel violent election-related conflict. There is no general election that is not coloured by the ethnic consideration of the candidates, a trend that is even more visible in presidential elections. Interestingly, the presidential elections that feature candidates from similar ethnic groups are contested on the grounds of candidate popularity, their charisma, the spread of their parties and ability of one party to out-rig the other (Osaghae 2020). This was particularly the case with the elections of 1999, 2007 and 2019 which were contested by candidates from the same ethnic bloc. The progressive deterioration of general elections in the country – which have assumed violent dimensions – is because they provide the most direct access to state capture.

For 16 years, the previous governing party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), had used its control of state power and patronage to perpetuate all manner of electoral fraud and entrench itself in office despite posting a mediocre level of performance in all parameters of governance. It was an era where electoral outcomes were known in advance; once a candidate secured the party nomination, such candidate was all but assured of victory. Like Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party, the PRI, the party was credited with 'the longest tenure in power of any party in the world' (Forley 1998, p. 137). The PDP boasted that it would rule Nigeria for 60 years.

Because of the high level of electoral malfeasance and blatant official meddling, electoral outcomes have been the subject of intense litigation with high numbers of election petitions filed in court by aggrieved politicians after each election circle. For instance, the total number of petitions filed after the 2003 general elections was 560. By 2007, this had increased to 1 290. A total of 731 election petitions were filed at the various election petition tribunals across the federation after the 2011 general elections. The 2015 elections attracted the lowest

number, with 297 petitions filed; however, the numbers increased again to 766 after the 2019 elections (Hamalai, Egwu & Omotola 2016; Yahaya 2019).

The desire to enhance the quality and boost the credibility and acceptability of electoral outcomes has resulted in a series of reforms such as the introduction of data-capturing technology (known as the smart card reader) and the machine-readable permanent voter card (PVC) in the 2015 and 2019 elections. As a result of these reforms, the 2015 general elections witnessed a dramatic drop in the level of election petitions, possibly reflecting an improved level of satisfaction with the electoral process. These reforms also culminated in the defeat of an entrenched and incumbent party and the alternation of political power between political parties, thereby fulfilling one of the preconditions for a consolidated democracy (Levan & Ajjola 2018). Speaking on the momentous occasion when he graciously conceded defeat, former President Goodluck Jonathan (2018, p. 142) stated that:

I handled the election and transition the way I did to maintain peace not just in Nigeria, but also in Africa. My thinking is that it is better to sacrifice power and gain peace and honour than to sacrifice peace and honour and gain the type of power that led Macbeth to the disastrous end he met with in William Shakespeare's renowned play.

A leading opposition figure at the time and current governor of Kaduna state, Nasir El-Rufai, attributed the feat to a unified opposition, credible electoral commission, the use of technology to reduce electoral fraud, and the engagement of the international community. The 2015 elections provided the political moment that made it possible, in the words of El Rufai (Mills et al. 2019, p. 195) that 'an entrenched, immensely rich and powerful political machine could be defeated in an election with little or no violence, partisan acrimony or resort to any electoral adjudication'.

The lead researcher of this study was a participant in the 2015 and 2019 elections as an ad-hoc staff member for the electoral management body. He witnessed the process at close quarters, from the distribution of election materials to the final declaration of results in Oyo State in the south-western part of the country where there was a more-than-average compliance with the electoral rules and guidelines. The outcome of the 2019 elections seems not to have met the standards set by the 2015 election. The final report of the European Union Election Observer Mission rated the overall conduct of the election as poor, noting that they were 'marked by severe operational and transparency shortcomings, electoral security problems, and low turnout' (EU 2019, p. 4). In its final report, the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room concluded that '[the] elections did not meet the credibility threshold based on the patterns of abuse of the process and

the consequent lack of integrity observed' (EU Final Report 2019, p. 4; NCSR Final Report 2019, p.1).

President Buhari won both the 2015 and 2019 presidential elections with change as his party campaign slogan, promising to tackle insecurity, fight corruption and grow the economy. The message of change resonated deeply with the majority and many thought he would deliver on these promises. With less than a year to the expiration of his second term in the office, none of the key campaign promises have been fulfilled; rather, the fortunes of the country seem to be deteriorating. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria are already shaping up to be the most keenly- contested since the return to civilian rule. Being an open-seat election with no incumbency factor, incendiary verbal exchanges by political gladiators over which ethno-regional bloc should produce the next president are already manifesting. These may be ominous signs of uncertain times ahead.

There is a sense in which every election in the Fourth Republic came with its own peculiarities, and 2023 will be no exception. The 1999 transition election had two southern candidates of the same ethnic stock and religion on the ballot. The second election in 2003 was the first to be organised by a sitting government and there was apprehension that it might end the way of the previous failed second election attempts of 1964 and 1983. The 2007 presidential election was an open-seat election and for the first time political power was transferred from one elected president to another. Local and international observers adjudged this election as better organised than the three previous elections, after a new reform-minded electoral management body was inaugurated. The election produced a president from a southern ethnic minority who defeated a strong northern challenger for the first time.

One glaring contradiction that trailed the 2011 presidential election was the fact that, despite being better organised than the three previous elections (in 1999, 2003 and 2007), it was characterised by post-election violence with over 800 fatalities and thousands of people displaced (Bekeo 2011). The 2015 election recorded perhaps the biggest upset in this democratic dispensation with the defeat of an incumbent president by an opposition candidate and party. In the 2019 election an incumbent president retained power for the second time, just as in 2003, in an election which observers assessed as having fallen short of the standards set in 2015.

The peculiarities of the 2023 presidential poll are heightened by the emergence of new and popular presidential candidates on the platforms of the Labour Party (LP) and the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) who have presented alternatives to the APC and PDP. The excitement which these new entrants into the presidential race have generated among young voters has led to a surge in registration for a permanent voters card (PVC). In a joint pre-election assessment

report by the United States-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI), these organisations averred that the LP and NNPP candidates represent 'viable third forces', concluding that 'If a third party draws sufficient support, a runoff presidential election could be a real possibility for the first time since the transition to democracy, adding complexity to the 2023 elections' (NDI/IRI Report 2022, p. 2).

WOMEN AND THE QUEST FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

The role of women in the development of any society cannot be overemphasised even when they are either neglected or overlooked. Perhaps it is in realisation of this truism that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Goal 5), much like the millennium development goals before them, now advocate for gender equality. The continuous global activism for gender equality has propelled many countries, even those that might be reluctant, to incorporate mainstream gender issues into their national policy and development frameworks. In Nigeria, the National Gender Policy represents such attempt. The recommendation in this policy document that 35% of elective and appointive public positions be reserved for women is, however, honoured in the breach (NGP 2006).

Several factors can be adduced for the marginal representation of women in the public life in the last two decades. An entrenched system of patriarchy and its oppressive values tends to sustain and legitimise the exclusion of women. Women are also disadvantaged economically as a result of the disparity and unequal access to the resources necessary to launch and fund a successful career in politics. Even in those instances where a few women manage to gain entry into the political space, they have to contend with the stereotypes and other challenges that come with sustaining a career in politics.

Despite women being a powerful tool in grassroots political mobilisation, political parties often reserve only a tokenistic position for women as leaders of the women's wing, a position from which they are unable to effect meaningful change or influence policy direction in the polity (Ramtohul 2021; Simbine & Obi 2021). For a group that constitutes half the population, according to the national population commission and the bureau for statistics, the injustice of unequal participation and representation in public life is one of the low points of two decades of democracy in Nigeria. The representation of women at the highest level of decision making has the capacity to affect public policy, especially in the area of reproductive health, education and children rights.

Ayisa Osori, a prominent civil society operative, recounted her experience of a failed attempt to secure a party ticket to contest a legislative seat in 2015. In

her book titled *Love does not win elections*, she described the sexism, treachery and endless demand for money by several brokers within the party in order to help secure delegates' votes. The number of female representatives in parliament and the cabinet has been abysmal since 1999, compared to a country like Rwanda where women dominate their parliament. Currently, there are 469 legislative seats in the National Assembly, and 109 and 360 in the Senate and House of Representatives respectively. Of this number, only seven women are in the Senate while 22 are in the House of Representatives. In a post-2019 election analysis the election management body stated that only 62 women had been elected across all tiers of government in the general election (Bamas 2019). Regarding the poor showing of women in the 2019 general election, Maria Arena, head of the European Union Election Observation mission in Nigeria remarked that: 'Nigeria has the lowest rate of women in parliament in Africa with the number decreasing since 2011 ... while attempts have been made to introduce legal reforms, political parties have not promoted women in party leadership or as candidates' (Daily Trust 2019).

CONCLUSION

Three distinct but overlapping processes of democratisation can be discerned, according to Nic Cheeseman (2015). First, the transition phase is when a country moves towards multiparty politics as Nigeria did in 1999. The second phase is the reconstitution of a new political order; and the third phase consolidates the gains of democracy. Two decades after the reintroduction of civilian rule, the country seems to have stalled in the final phase of the democratisation process. Notwithstanding the significant gains made, Nigeria's democracy remains fragile, the dividends of democracy are still not immediately tangible, and growing inequality persists between an affluent minority and the vast majority. Progressing from the transition to the consolidation stages of the democratisation continuum will necessarily demand a deliberate public policy framework geared towards blunting the edges of debilitating poverty, and further sanitisation of the electoral process.

However, it is not all doom and gloom, as being able to keep the restless and adventurous military away from meddling in direct governance, and by offering some opportunities for the freedom of expression and other civil liberties, democracy is gradually proving to be not too frail a plant to survive in a hostile environment. While the challenge confronting the country transcends the 2022 governance structure, reconfiguring the structure of governance is a necessary first step in freeing the boundless possibilities embedded in the country. Overall, the reintroduction and opening up of the democratic space in 1999 represents a 'second liberation' from the long reign of internal repression under a jackboot

military rule – the first being the liberation from colonial rule and the granting of independence in 1960.

However, a ‘third liberation’ remains unrealised, and this is the liberation from poverty, misery and immiseration (Mills & Herbst 2012). Until and unless the vast majority of Nigerians are unshackled from the yoke of deprivation, democratic consolidation will remain a mirage.

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