

Inter-Party Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria: A Case Study of Southwest Geo-Political Zone

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Abstract

Political party is one of the major tools for aggregating and mobilizing the various interests and resources for the purpose of nation building. This is the tradition in all climes that embrace democracy, expectedly when Nigeria gained independence, people were happy that at least the era of colonialism is gone thereby giving Nigerians the opportunity to freely participate in electoral process, and do things in their own ways. It is now worrisome that despite over five decades after independence, parties are still enmeshed in internal wrangling making a mess of democratic process. The work examined inter-parties conflict in the southwest geo-political zone of Nigeria, it looked at the implication of inter-party crisis on democratic sustenance, and it equally looked at the history of inter-parties conflict. The paper relied on secondary source of data. The paper concluded that, unless political tolerance is embraced in Nigeria democratic system, inter-parties conflict will continue to dominate the political system and invariably affect the growth and development of Nigeria.

Keywords: Conflict, Democracy, Nation building, Political parties.

Introduction

No democracy exists without political parties even if parties differ in organizational structure, ideologies, size, functions and goal. It is the platform through which citizens elect their leaders. Democracy can only function well with the existence of political parties. In a democracy, conflict is inevitable, this is because democracy is about competition which seeks the effective ways through which a society can be governed and sustained. Inter-parties conflict occurs when two or more parties are competing for the same position within the political system.

Why is inter-party conflict rampant in Nigeria particularly in the southwest geo-political zone? According to Aristotle, cultural homogeneity leads to fast economy, social and political development. Based on this assertion, one is forced to question the incessant inter-party conflicts in the zone despite its homogeneous nature. How is this inter-parties conflict affecting the development of southwest geo-political zone and Nigeria as a whole? What are the factors responsible for this inter-parties conflict? What are the responsibilities of citizens

and government to solve this inter-parties conflict? These and other questions form the basis of this paper.

Literature Review

Political Party and Democracy

Political parties act as an intermediary between voters and the state, and by structuring the political field; they help voters in making their choice. A political party is one of the political institutions in a competitive democracy. Political parties serve as an index through which democratic governance could be compared in states, in that the structure and operation of parties politics for determining the fragility or otherwise of democratic system (Omodia 2010). A situation where political parties are poorly structured to perform articulate, aggregative, communicative and educative function, such a system is likely going to be associated with poor political culture which tend to make the democratic process so fragile. Conversely in a situation where political parties are well structured to perform articulate aggregative, communicative and educative functions, such a system is often associated with participant political culture which tends to ensure a stable democratic process (Almond 2010). Epstein (1967) defines political party as any group, however loosely oriented, seeking to elect office holder. Political party is any group of politically active persons outside a government who organize to capture government by nominating and electing officials who thereby control the operations of government and determine its policies.

On the other hand, Harvey and Harvey (1974:269) opined that democracy means much more than the "one man, one vote".

They believe it involves among others, setting affairs according to known rules of government, toleration of minority views, regular elections, and freedom of speech and above all, observance of rule of law. Ajayi (2003) also posits that any claim to be democracy by any regime or state must essentially embrace popular participation, competitive choice, the enjoyment of civil and political liberties by citizenry in real terms, and the accountability of the leadership.

Going by Schumpeter submission, for a system to be tagged as democratic, the rulers should be chosen by the ruled or their representatives. By this rule, one of the essential functions expected of the electorate in democracy is that of producing the government. Schumpeter argued further that once this has taken place, the democratic voters is expected to respect the political division of labour by leaving decision or issues in government that is to the leaders whom they have elected (Schumpeter Quoted by Lively, 1975).

According to Lively (1975) democracy is a mechanism by which the political system maintains its equilibrium. With the above definition of political parties and democracy by various scholars, it can be deduced that political party and democracy are twins. Without political parties, democracy cannot operate successfully because of the vital role of political parties in democracy.

Political Party and Inter-party Conflict: An Overview

Inter-parties conflict is one of the major factors that are affecting the development of democracy in Nigeria. This is because political parties are not performing their constitutional duties. In western countries, United State of America (USA) for example where democracy emanated from, it has been mandated for a political parties to perform some certain functions. What are these functions? According to US National Democratic Institute (NDI), for instance, political parties form the cornerstone of democratic society and serve meaningful

functions, unlike any other institution in democracy. Parties aggregate and represent social interests and provide a structure for political participation. They trained political leaders who will assume a role in governing society. In addition, parties contest and win election to seek a measure of control of government institution. Similarly, the United National Development programme (UNDP) maintains that, political parties are key stone of democratic governance; they provide a structure for a political participation, serve as training ground for political leadership and transform social interest to public interest.

With reference to the contribution of United National Development programme about political parties (group interest to public interest), that is when a political party trains a political leader, contest in an election and win political power within the political system, the dividend of democracy within the political system should not go only to the political party that voted him into that position. Every benefit of the political system must be generalized to the public. Talking about this issue of public interest, reverse is the case in Nigeria. The view of political parties in Nigeria is that political system belongs to the party that occupied the system which is wrong. According to David Easton, political system should stand as the authoritative allocation of value to the public not to the political parties. The understanding of political parties about the political system has turned politics to do or die affairs in Nigerian societies and this has led to frequent occurrence of inter parties conflicts.

In line with the function of political parties according to United States Democratic Institute, political parties are to represent social interest. In this regard, members of political parties must not be denied their constitutional right to vote and to be voted for during election. This is the only way citizens can express their interest. That is, who is to govern them. But Nigeria political parties are not performing this constitutional function of political parties. Election malpractices has dominated the system, members of political parties have not totally been given the constitutional right to vote and to be voted for, citizen have not been given a total freedom to express their interest, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has not been totally independent. In this regard, political parties have seen it as a periodic assignment to train political thugs that will defend their stand during election and this has led to manifestation of inter-parties conflicts in Nigeria.

A Brief History of Inter-Parties Conflicts in Nigeria

Inter-party conflicts have become the hallmark of party politics in Nigeria. The inter-party violence that we are experiencing now is a manifestation of practices that predated the attainment of political independence in Nigeria. The first republic paraded the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) the Northern People Congress (NPC) the Action Group (AG), the Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) and the United Middle-belt Congress (UMBC). It needs be stressed that political parties were characterized by party feuds. In the second republic, there were intensive struggle and unhealthy rivalry among the registered parties namely; the People Redemption Party (PRP) the Unity party of Nigeria (UPN) The National party of Nigeria (NPN) the Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) and Nigeria Advance Party (NAP). The National Republic Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP) created by Ibrahim Babangida regime in the aborted third republic also exhibited internal and external schisms and rivalries.

No other republic exhibited inter-parties squabbles more than this fourth republic. It has recorded bitter struggle among parties as well as violent inter-party relation (Olayinka, 2009:53) there are a lot of undemocratic tendencies displayed by political elites.

The desire of individual to rule at all cost has sold political leadership to the highest bidders, as huge amount of money are needed for campaign, mass mobilization and electoral manipulations. Therefore, desperate political aspirants who wish to win elections even if they are not qualified to contest such election embrace godfatherism which has become a factor in Nigerian politics such that no politician can achieve success without the backing of a godfather. (Atere and Akinwale, 2005).

So worrisome is the situation in this fourth republic that godfathers create democratic setback by encouraging illegitimate means of seeking political power thereby indulging in corrupt practices such as arms-stockpiling, thuggery, bribery, election rigging and other form of political misdemeanor (s)

This issue of godfatherism in this fourth republic has motivated inter-party conflict in Nigeria since the political parties believe that political system belongs to the political parties that occupied the system.

Inter-Party Conflict in Southwest Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria in Fourth Republic

Aristotle viewed politics as who get what, when and how. Politicians in Nigeria especially in southwest geopolitical zone of Nigeria have been acting on this when and how. Some of these politicians also believed in Machavelic style of politics. Because Macheaveli believed that the end justifies the means. Intra and inter-party conflict have become the hallmark of party politics in Nigeria. (Olaniyan 2009, Muhammad, 2005). In the first republic, infighting within AG resulted in serious conflict which eventually became the conflagration that consumed the republic. in the second republic, there was widespread violence in Oyo State and Ondo State between UPN and NPN that led to wanton destruction of lives and properties. In this fourth republic, inter-party conflict has turn to frequent activities, because the political parties have seen the political system as a business centre, they believe that political system belongs to any political party that occupies the system. In 2011, election became thug of war between the people democratic party and Labour Party in Ondo state, between Action Congress of Nigeria and People Democratic Party in Oyo State and between Action Congress of Nigeria and people Democratic Party in Ogun State. These political parties want to get the political power at all cost by introducing thuggery into politics. Politician created many democratic setbacks by encouraging illegitimate means of seeking political power thereby indulging in corrupt practices such as arms-stock piling, political thuggery, bribery, election rigging and other form of political misdemeanor. The politics that we are practicing in this fourth republic in south west geo-political zone is a politics of gangsterism, war, blackmail and acrimony which is not in line with the principle of democracy. Party conflict is not spontaneous or uncoordinated activities by illiterates but carried out by political elites who are determined to get power by all means regardless of consequences. A decade after returning of the country to civil rule, politically motivated killing have continued to hunt Nigeria democratic project. It is estimated that several Nigerians have lost their lives, many property worth billions of naira have been destroyed, the political climate has been very hostile and unstable, party conflict, lawlessness and devastating influence of godfatherism have continues to pose serious challenges to the sustenance of country democracy (Ogundiya and Baba, 2005).

Despite the fact that we are speaking the same language with the same culture in southwest geo-political zone of Nigeria, inter-party conflict has caused several political assassination in the zone in this fourth republic of which the major one are the killing of Bola Ige, the former Anthony General of the federation, the killing of Funsho William in Lagos state,

the Killing of honorable Ogunkehin in Emure Ile in the 2012 election period in Owo, on the day of governorship debate in Ondo State and several others.

But the question here is that, is the inter-party conflict in tandem with the principle of democracy? Definitely not. As Abraham Lincoln defined democracy, he said is the government of the people by the people and for the people. In this case, the choice of the people must be respected in every democratic society. People must be given the chance through political parties to elect their representative as it is being done in developed country. Political tolerance and accommodation must be encouraged so as to maintain sustainable democracy in southwest geo-political zone and Nigeria in general as it is being stated in the principle of democracy.

Causes of Inter-Parties Conflicts

Several factors are responsible for inter parties conflicts in Nigeria most especially, south west of Nigeria. Some of these factors are discussed below.

Monetization of politics. Lawal (2007) posited that in Nigeria, politics is conceived as an investment. The politician, having invested colossally on campaigns and others political activities, coupled with the existing system of winner takes all, would want to win at all cost. And the need to employ the use of thugs and touts to destabilize and rig elections becomes inevitable especially when such politicians are not popular candidates.

Political party's orientation: the orientation of political parties in Nigeria is that the political system belongs to any political party that occupied the system. This has encouraged political parties to divert from the principle of democracy by introducing thugs into politics because every party wants to win the election by all means.

Sit-tight syndrome: this is very common in Nigerian politics. This is a situation in which a political party tries to hold on to power. In an attempt to hang on to power, parties often create a regime of violence, conflict, political thugs, hooligans and scavengers to sing their praise, intimidate and kill opposing political parties member if they become intransigent.

Implication of Inter-Party Conflict on Democracy

For any democratic society to experience development, the principle of democracy must be put in place. Citizens must not be disfranchised; they must be allowed to express their interest. Civil liberty and individual rights must be respected. Although conflict is bound to happen in every society, but once it is becoming too much, it will definitely lead to the underdevelopment of that particular society. The intention of political parties to rule at all cost has created too much conflict in Nigeria. Political party's crises have altered the affection of an average Nigerian towards party's activities which have not only affected the legitimacy of the elected incumbent political heads but also the citizen belief in democracy as a sustainable model of government.

Inter-parties conflict creates insecurity of life and properties on democracy. Many people have died, while some have lost valuable properties in the course of political violence arising from various inter-parties and other crises across the country. In any democracy that is full of inter-parties conflict as witnessed in Nigeria, fundamental human right will always be denied, right to vote and to be voted for will definitely be eroded, it will be difficult for citizens to elect the right candidate of their choice, and unqualified people will occupy political power within the political system and mismanage the available resources in the political system.

Akindele and Olaopa (1998:12) encapsulate the effects of inter-party conflict on democracy as follow:

- Breakdown of law and order
- Kidnapping and secret killings
- Marital collapse
- Pathological geocentrism
- Anarchy and civil disobedience

Futuristic incubation and fertilization of glory and fratricidal conflicts and ethno-cultural hatred.

Apathy and disregard for purposeful political participation and ethnicisation of political activities.

Following from the aforementioned, it is observed that inter-parties conflict will always give a setback to democracy. Inter-parties conflict in Nigeria most especially in southwest geo-political zone has gotten to the stage that assassination, rigging of election, arson, vandalism, riot have turned to a frequent exercise and this has made democratic sustenance a tall dream.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Having gone through the study, it has been noted that conflict is inevitable in any society, but when conflict is getting too much, it will definitely dominate the political system of that society and this will affect the development of democracy.

This study revealed that inter-party conflict is one of the factors that is affecting the development of democracy in Nigeria. And the question here is that, how can we control this inter-party conflict? First, politicians should avoid unguided statement that could ignite violence in the body polity. That is, politician should play according to the universally accepted norms and value of democracy.

Second, Independent National Electoral Commission should be truly independent.

Third, a democratic culture needs to be imbibed both by the government and the governed.

At the same time, government must look at the economic sector of a country. That is, job opportunity must be opened for graduates. Because most of the political thugs in Nigeria are mostly graduates from tertiary institution. Good job should be created for the youth.

Fourth, politicians in Nigeria should learn the habit of accepting defeat. They must not see politics as do or die affair. Political parties should not see the political system as the property of any political party that occupies the system. Because, this is one of the greatest orientations of political parties in Nigeria.

Lastly, there must be equality, tolerance and fairness in the system and the whole process of election must be democratized and transparent according to the principle of democracy. If the above recommendations are embraced, they will go a long way in controlling inter-parties conflict, and promoting sustainable democracy in Nigeria

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