

POLITICAL PARTY PRIMARIES AS POTENTIAL SEEDBED OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

ALUKO BAYODE (PhD)

**Department of Political Science and Public Administration
Adeleke University, Ede**

ABSTRACT

Electoral Violence has become a major challenge confronting the electoral process in Nigeria especially since the advent of democracy in 1999. Worse still, primaries of Nigerian political parties have been identified as potential seedbed of electoral violence which almost always affects the outcome of general elections. Political parties, as it were, constitute agents of socio-political mobilisation which help in the democratic development of any liberal society. However, despite this importance, lack of internal democracy had been fingered as a major challenge. For instance, factors such as godfatherism, money politics, corruption and non-adherence of party members to rules as enshrined in the party constitution, have been identified as reasons for continued existence of this menace in internal dynamics of Nigerian political parties. The main objective of this paper is to examine political party primaries as potential seedbed of electoral violence in Nigeria. The paper is anchored on group theory supported by Michel's iron law of oligarchy which postulates that political party as an organisation are more often than not, being controlled by a smaller number of party executives. The paper adopted secondary method of research which involves the use of library, journals and archival materials. The study found that in spite of the important role of political parties in liberal democracies, those in Nigeria compared to their counterparts in advanced countries, are finding it difficult to imbibe the culture of strong internal democracy. The paper concluded that the consequence of this misdemeanour will be Nigerian political parties becoming seedbeds of rancour, disunity and disputes; the result of which will be the germination of "baobab tree" of violence, the fruit of which is seen in the form of electoral violence during general elections. This tree of violence growing within political parties as a result of shabby primaries must be uprooted if Nigeria must experience peace in the conduct of its general elections.

Keywords: Democracy, Electoral Violence, Internal Democracy, Political Parties, Primaries.

Introduction

The role of political parties in any democratic setting cannot be overemphasized. Over the years in Nigeria especially since the formation of the first political party in 1923, Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), political parties have been found to play major roles in democratic governance. However, the challenge posed by lack of internal democracy within Nigerian political parties which almost always manifest in the unorganised and lacklustre modus operandi of their primaries, continue to be a source of concern. Generally, as it is obtained in advanced democracies, political parties organise primary elections to prepare their candidates for the main election otherwise referred to as general elections.

Experience have shown that the shoddy manner which Nigerian political parties organise primary elections gives room for disaffection, acrimony and animosity here in this paper referred to as “seedbed” of violence which more often than not, leads to expression of sponsored violence by aggrieved aspirants during general elections. According to Merriam – Webster Dictionary, seedbed is “a soil or bed of soil prepared for planting seed or a place or source of growth or development”. By implication, this paper interrogates party primaries as a source of growth or development of the process which may snowball into violence during the general election when not well managed.

As mentioned earlier, political parties are among important flavours of democracy as a result of the important position they occupy in a democracy. According to Odigwe (2015), political parties are known as a platform for recruitment of political leaders and the organisation of parliament and government, both in advanced and developing democracies”. Ikelegbe (1995), in Odigwe (2015) sees a political party as “an organised group with structures, hierarchy and leadership”. Idike (2014) sees political parties as “organs responsible for interest articulation to seek power for the implantation of this interest”. According to Akubo, et al (2014), political parties “serve as measure and indicator of an effective democracy”. As plausible and important these roles and functions are, lack of internal democracy within these parties had gone a long way to affect their ratings as agent of socio-political transformation in Nigeria.

Democracy, as it were, guarantee majority rule. It is in this light that Nassbaum (2000) in Nwogu (2015) defines democracy as “the capacity of all voters to participate freely and fully in the life of their society”. Diamond (2004) in Nwogu (2015) sees democracy as “a form of government in which all eligible citizens have an equal say in law-making”. Internal democracy in political parties provides opportunities for members to vote for their preferred candidates who will represent such parties in the general election, According to Odigwe (2015), internal democracy “provides an atmosphere where the party members have free access and consent to party rules”. Arter (2021) conceives of party primaries (internal democracy) as “membership ballot which may be institutionalised through the use of routinised and internalised instrument in the candidate selection”. In this regard, it can be aptly said that Nigerian political parties are yet to institutionalised and internalised internal democracy. This can be seen from the plethora of issues that had emanated in past primary election of the various political parties in Nigeria where aggrieved party members and contestants approach the court for judicial settlement of unresolved primaries. Kenig and Prusyers (2018), defines internal democracy within political parties as “the move towards more inclusive methods, often labelled as primaries”. Kenig, et al (2015), conceive the term “primaries” as “the selection of candidates for national or local elections involving all party members or at least party sympathisers”. This definition takes into account where a political party decides to adopt the direct process of electing who will represent the party at the general election. However, in most cases, where a political party adopt the indirect election process, majority of the party members are excluded thus paving the way for party representatives from ward level the opportunity to vote for candidates during party primaries.

It is unfortunate to observe that the culture of internal democracy has failed to find its firm footing in Nigerian political parties. This paper therefore interrogates the consequences of this lack of internal democracy in political parties in Nigeria especially given their lacklustre

approach to organisation of party primaries which as it was said earlier, prepare seedbeds for electoral violence.

Statement of the Problem

There is no denial of the fact that political parties are major player in democratic engineering of any liberal society. For instance, they help in mobilising and galvanising the interest of people who share the same aspirations for the purpose of seeking power through the electoral process. The lacuna in this aspiration finds expression in the inability of Nigerian political parties to embrace the culture of strong internal democracy. For instance, since independence, political parties in Nigeria have not been able to put their acts together in the area of organising credible primary elections.

Many reasons have been advanced to have accounted for this trend. First, is the influence of godfatherism. Contestants to elective positions almost always depend on sponsors as a result of lack of financial strength to meander through the process of election. As a result, these godfathers eventually emerge as influencers during primary elections. The outcome of this ugly scenario can better be imagined. For instance, it has been observed by political analysts that godfathers always control the levers of government from behind the scene when their subject wins election and are in government. The result of this remote control has always been a government that not able to serve the interest of the people that voted it into power but that of its principal (godfathers) that brought such government into power *ab initio*. Secondly, is the challenge of money politics which has over the years, become a determining factor in the selection of who will represent political parties in the main elections. In this regard, aspirants who have good policies to offer but financially weak are made to hold the short end of the stick.

Thirdly, is the challenge of corruption which has become endemic in Nigerian political parties thus making the organisation of party primaries to become compromised. Another reason is the non-adherence of party members to its rules as enshrined in the party constitution. The consequence of all these is that outcomes of primary elections become disputed and more often, unacceptable by a faction of party members. This almost always snowball into the aggrieved at the primary to either cross-carpet or ventilate such grievances through the window of sponsored violence or collaboration with opposition party to frustrate winning of election by his own political party during the general election.

Literature Review

Scholars have in the recent made submissions on the subject of political party primaries and its implications for democratic governance. Comparatively, for instance, Akrsøy (2021) argued that “the voting rules of Republican People’s Party (RPP) primaries in the context of Istanbul boosted the importance of public recognition as compared with the importance of experience in party offices, which is expected to be one of the most rewarding characteristics for candidates in closed primaries”. In this regard, members of RPP in Turkey are adherence to rules and regulations of their political party. This is a direct opposite of what is obtained in Nigeria where political parties flout rules and regulations as enshrined in party constitution. Kenig and Prusyers (2018) argued that “while this democratisation of intra-party affairs has the potential to enhance democratic values such as participation, competitiveness, and

transparency, it also creates several challenges". These identified challenges include, "concern about oversight and accountability, the possibility of low quality participation, fear of divisiveness of primary elections, and questions surrounding the representational outcomes that primaries produce". In Nigeria, the quality of participation, the division that primary election creates among party members and the outcome which party primary produces, had in no small measure contribute to tensions being witnessed at the wake of impending general elections. The primary election organised by the two major political parties (APC and PDP) in Osun State, Nigeria where the aggrieved showed restlessness in the wake of activities which led to the main gubernatorial election becomes a case in point to drive this argument home. In this regard, Cross and Prusyers (2017), observed that "losers of intra-party elections are more likely to exit the party, significantly less likely to remain active and engage in party politics and significantly more likely to report dissatisfaction with party membership". An aspirant who loses in a primary election may or may not leave the party but there is the likelihood that such may work at cross-purposes to the interest of the party which may include sponsorship of violence during the general elections or leaking secrets/strategy of winning elections by his party to the opposition.

Scarrow (2020) argued that "intra-party ballots are described as multi-stage procedures with key rules at each stage procedures whose attributes can exacerbates or mitigate the tensions unleashed by contest over party decisions". Again from this argument flows the tendency for intra-party election outcome to either generate tension or help in unifying party members. However, experience have shown that most times, rather than assist in unifying party members, party primaries have often contribute to tensions which manifest during general election as violence. Cordero and Collier (2018) observed that "one major reason for the adoption of more inclusive methods of candidates' selection is the crisis of political trust in political parties which has increased significantly in the last decade". In this regard, lack of trust among party members and political aspirants within the same political party especially in Nigeria, constitute potential seedbed for divisive tendencies which manifest as violence during general elections.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars had in various studies propound theories to anchor research on party politics and the electoral process. For instance, in line with the group theory propounded by Bentley and Truman, Lavaque-Manty (2008), argued that "all political activity is groups pursuing their interests against the interest of others". According to him, "despite their influence, Bentley and Truman are increasingly forgotten". Michel (1962) further adumbrated the group theory through the propagation of "iron law of oligarchy". According to him, "all forms of organisation regardless of how democratic they may be at the start will eventually and inevitably develop oligarchic tendencies thus making true democracy practically and theoretically impossible, especially in large groups and complex organisations". In this instance, political parties can be regarded as a complex organisation.

Frustration/aggression theory propounded by Dollard, etal (1939), argued that "frustration often leads to aggression". The main basis of the theory was that "if a goal is being blocked or thwarted, people often become frustrated". This frustration often leads to aggressive behaviour which always manifest through violence. It is assumed that since party aspirants

and their supporters find it impossible to achieve their aim through democratic process of primary elections; they often result to violence to ventilate their grievances.

However, this paper anchors its theoretical underpinning on the group theory backed by Michel's iron law of oligarchy. The fact that political party as a group is more often than not susceptible to control by small number of party executives from the ward level to the national level, give this privileged few the opportunity to determine and manipulate the direction and modus operandi of party primaries against the stipulation of party constitution. The outcome of this trend has always been the manifestation of grievances and the end result, sponsored violence during the general election.

Methodology

This paper adopts the secondary method of research which involves the use of library, journals and archival materials.

Findings and Discussion

The study found that in spite of the important place which political parties occupy in any liberal democracy, the ones in Nigeria unlike its counterparts in advanced democracies are finding it herculean and an arduous task to imbibe the culture of strong internal democracy. This study identified reasons for the emergence of this ugly trend. This include; the influence of godfatherism, money politics, lack of accountability and transparency on the part of the political class, corruption, and non-adherence by party members to the rules and regulations enshrined in the party constitution. All these identified factors contribute in no small measure to why party primaries are becoming potential seedbed of electoral violence which manifest during elections. This is done through the recruitment of foot soldiers by aggrieved aspirants who had lost in the party primaries. These foot soldiers are translated to political thugs during the elections to disrupt the peaceful conduct of the electoral process.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper interrogates the subject of political party primaries as potential seedbed of electoral violence in Nigeria. The study emphasized the role of political parties in Nigeria's democratic governance especially in the area of its ability to mobilise critical citizenry towards political engagements and activism. However, as noted earlier, inability of Nigerian political parties to imbibe the culture of internal democracy has reduced their stature as critical agents in democratic development. The paper concludes that the implication of this misdemeanour is that outcomes of primary elections are always subject of dispute thus sowing the seed of division within party members. This goes to manifest in the aggrieved recruitment of sympathisers who are hired to disrupt or compromised the electoral process at the detriment of the interest of his political party.

Hope is not lost though. This is because internal democracy in political parties in Nigeria can be strengthened if party members and its leaders will have a change of attitude by their avowed commitment to the principles of fairness, justice and equity. In this regard, the political will to make democracy work must be paramount in the mind of ordinary party members and political gladiators within the parties. In addition, the influence of godfathers must be whittled down if Nigerian political parties must experience strong internal

democracy. Party rules and regulations as enshrined in its constitution must be the grand norm that will always guide the conduct of party primaries.

It is envisaged that if all these recommendations are implemented, internal democracy will become entrenched in Nigerian political parties and party politics in Nigeria will compete more favourably with advanced democracies where electoral violence instigated or induced by political parties are rarely discussed or mentioned.

References

- Akubo, A & Yakubun, A (2014) Political Parties and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, *Global Journal of Political Science and Administration*, 2 (3), 79-108
- Akrsoy, F (2021) Voting Roles, Context, and Public Recognition in Closed Primaries: An Empirical Case Study, *Journal of Representative Democracy*, 57 (4), 531-534
- Arter, D (2021) Digging in the 'Secret Garden' of Politics: The Institutionalisation and De-Institutionalisation of Membership Ballots in the Selection of Finish Parliamentary Candidates, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 44 (2)
- Cordero, G & Collier, X (2018) Democratizing Candidates Selection: New Methods, Old Receipts? DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-76550-1
- Cross, W & Prusyers, S (2017) Sore losers? The Cost of Intra-Party Democracy, *The Politics*, 25 (4), DOI: 10.1177/1354068817728216
- Dollard, J, Doob, L.W, Miller, N.E, Mowrer, O.H, Sears, R.R (1939) *Frustration and Aggression*, Yale University Press
- Diamond, L (2004) *What is Democracy?* [http://www.standard.edu/-/diamond/Iraq/what is democracy 012004.htm](http://www.standard.edu/-/diamond/Iraq/what%20is%20democracy%20012004.htm)
- Idike, A (2014) Political Parties, Political Apathy and Democracy in Nigeria: Contending Issues and the way forward, *Kuwait Chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management*, 4 (3), 1-10
- Ikelegbe, A (1995) *Politics and Government: An Introductory and Comparative Perspective*, Uri Publishing.
- Kenig, O & Prusyers, S (2018) *The Challenges of Inclusive Intra-Party Selection Methods: Democratizing Candidates Selection*, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-76550-12
- Lavaque-Manty, M (2018) Bentley, Truman and the Study of Groups, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9(1), DOI: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.9.072004.085705
- Nussbaum, M (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capacity Approach*, Cambridge University Press.
- Nwogu, G. (2015) Democracy: Its meaning and Dissenting Opinions of the Political Class in Nigeria: A Philosophical Approach, *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6 (4).
- Odigwe, O. (2015) Nigerian Political Parties and Internal Democracy, *African Journal of Governance and Development*, 4 (2).
- Scarrow, S. (2020) Intra-Party Democracy and Party Unity: Varied rules, Varied Consequences, *Representation*, 57(4), 1-17.