

Opposition Parties and Political Opposition in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Necessity or Distraction

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Abstract

The Nigerian political system is one that has been characterized by a near absence of formidable opposition over the decades. This is contrary to what happens in developed countries of the West where opposition parties have been known to keep faith with the mandate of the people by serving as a necessary check on the activities of the ruling party. However, in recent time, there seems to be some rumble from the opposition parties in the country as they are beginning to coalesce into a formidable group for their collective interest. Incidentally, considering the peculiarity of our system where more often than not political affiliation, disposition or inclination is not premised on any ideological conviction but, more rightly, on the leeway it provides for primitive accumulation, it remains to be seen if this new found voice by the opposition will be beneficial to the generality of the citizens or a distraction of a sort. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to critically examine the role of the opposition parties and political opposition in the Nigerian state and make recommendations towards repositioning them for a more altruistic contribution in the current democratic dispensation.

Key words: Political Parties, Opposition Parties, Nigerian State, Primitive Accumulation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy the world over is practised with the instrument of political parties. The parties contest in general elections with a view to winning votes and normally the party that wins the highest number of seats, whether at the local, state or federal level, becomes the ruling party and forms the government (at that level), while those that won less seats (or none at all) form the opposition parties. In the light of the above, Epelle and Enyekit (2013) have noted that where there is no viable opposition, there cannot be said to be true democracy. Nigeria's fourth republic is witnessing a democracy that is practised with about 60 political parties (Abimbola and Adesote, 2012) contesting for seats in the political realm –pointing to the fact that whichever party that wins the election and forms the government will be pitched against about 50 other (opposition) political parties.

This fourth republic, unlike others before it, has witnessed a lot of activities supposedly associated with the opposition. Our media – print and electronic – have been flooded with open and closed letters, mudslinging and inciting statements from opposition politicians attacking the policies and programmes of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Nigeria's seemingly weak opposition has recently found its voice in the current merger of the opposition parties of Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), All Nigeria People's party (ANPP) and the defectors from the rank and file of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) to form the opposition ALL PROGRESSIVES CONGRESS (APC). Nevertheless, we can say that this new found voice is not in the interest of the masses bearing in mind that these defectors never defected in defense of ideological differences but on personal differences.

The objective of any political party, be it ruling or opposition, is to control the government for the common good of the masses. The opposition serves as the vanguard for the voiceless drawing attention of the government to the pressing needs of the people while, on the other hand enlightening the public on the inadequacies in government policies and programmes.

At this point, one is tempted to ask: what constitutes a true opposition? What function does the opposition play in a true democratic setting? Whose interest does the opposition protect and finally can what we have in Nigeria today be said to be truly opposition party? At a time like this in our national life, when the country is grappling with numerous problems, is the opposition not supposed to provide an alternative solution to these problems instead of heating up the polity?

In the light of the above questions, therefore, this paper seeks to identify the pristine functions of the opposition political parties in Nigeria and if the roles they currently play amount to a necessity or a distraction.

2. DEFINITION OF TERMS

2.1 Political Party

In Africa Leadership Forum (2000:2) political party is defined as “an aggregate of people united by a common and collective desire to capture political power and authority within a legitimate and legal political framework by canvassing for votes in a democratic polity”.

Appadorai (2004) on the other hand, defines political party as an organized group of citizens who hold similar political opinions and who work to get control of the government in order that the policies in which they are interested may be carried into effect. This definition leaves out the important question of the interest of the masses or national interest in party formation.

Based on this lacuna, we would rather give an alternative and more relevant definition. A political party can be said to be a group of citizens who have and believe in similar political ideologies, whose aim is to campaign, contest and win election and finally assume political power in a particular state in the interest (the common good) of the masses and the society.

2.2 Opposition Party

Bagbin (2009:27) defined opposition as “minority party or parties that do not wield executive powers; the party or parties that act as a check on the government”. In this paper, opposition party will mean all other parties that could have won at least one or more seats at the local, state or national level, but could not win total control of the government at that level. This clarification has become very necessary at this point since in Nigeria, a political party can win a majority of the seats in a State House of Assembly, but will be an opposition party in another state or at the federal level.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FUNCTIONALISM

The functionalists believe that societies or social systems have needs and that institutions and practices within these systems can be explained in terms of the functions they perform (McLean and Mcmillan 2003). Thompson and Hickey (1996:21) explain the functionalists' perspective of society thus: “a system of interdependence and interrelated parts within the overall structure of the system, each part fulfils specific function which in turn contributes to the overall functioning of the entire system”.

Thus, functionalists view society as having a structure consisting of various important components or basic social institutions like the family, religion, education, politics and economy, each performing important functions contributing to the overall wellbeing of the structure. Applying the above to political system, it can be seen that governance or government is made up of different parts, with each part performing a specific function for the general good of the system.

Haralambos and Heald (2008) explain further that functionalists drew their comparison from biology. The biologist while wanting to know how the human body works will examine each part separately in terms of its function and relationship to the other parts of the body. For the sociologist, the society is compared to the human body having various parts, each part of society is examined in terms of its contribution (function) to the maintenance of the social system.

Thomas (1995) explains the functional approach to society thus: “...the functionalist view society as an interrelated parts that work together to produce a stable social system. According to functionalists, society is held together to ensure that the social system runs smoothly”.

For Horgan (2008), functionalism sees society as conceived of inter-related parts in which no part can be understood in isolation from the whole. According to her, a change in any part leads to a certain degree of imbalance which in turn results in change in other parts of the system as a whole.

In all the views above, the common factor is the working together of the independent parts of the society for the smooth running of the system. When applied to government and governance, it will imply that the various arms of government viz - Executive, Legislature and Judiciary are to work together independently and collectively for the smooth running of government. In our

present context, functionalism means that the ruling party and the opposition (the alternate government) are to function interdependently and collectively for the wellbeing of the society, in this case of Nigeria.

We have chosen the functionalist approach in this paper based on the political history of Nigeria – a tripartite entity with different cultures merged together to form one entity. Sequel to this, it is expected that these entities, acting separately but collectively, will work together for the overall good of the Nigerian state. In addition to this, it is a fact that government and governance cannot be carried out in outer space; it has to be done by people who have similar ideologies and who have come together under one umbrella – the political party.

4. POLITICAL PARTY: FORMATION AND FUNCTION

As have been pointed out earlier in this paper, political parties, whether ruling or opposition, are formed with one major aim – the acquisition of power for the benefit of the masses or the interest of the nation. Consequently, the interest of this work is to find out the functions of the opposition political parties and establish if they are meeting up with their role as the alternative government in this fourth republic Nigeria. Based on this, we will ask ourselves the question – what is opposition party and what function does it perform?

In tackling these questions, it will be of immense benefit if we showcase what happens in some other developed democracies like the United Kingdom and United States of America. In a training manual published by the *Parliamentary Strengthening Organization* website, the functions of the opposition include the following:

- i. initiator of laws at parliament;
- ii. representative of his constituency;
- iii. the alternative government (the shadow government) by being united and creating policies that are relevant to the daily lives of the people;
- iv. scrutiny and accountability – by exercising oversight function over the implementation of the laws by the executive;
- v. the opposition makes known in parliament the feelings of those sections of society whose views may otherwise be ignored.

The above functions/roles are what obtain in UK and USA but looking at the functions of the opposition in our African setting, one will begin to wonder if it is the same form of democracy we are practising. In a lead paper, presented by Hon. Alban S.K. Bagbin, leader of the official opposition in the parliament of Ghana, he enumerated the functions/roles of the opposition as classified under four broad headings –

- i. the voice of the voiceless;
- ii. alternative to the ruling government;
- iii. official opposition; and,
- iv. a critical partner in nation building (www.parliament.uk/mps.and.lords).

As the voice of the voiceless, the opposition expresses the views of a significant section of the electorate and helps to ensure that concerns of the various groups and other interest are not trampled on. Being the alternative to the ruling government, the opposition is to constantly remind the electorate that there is a viable alternative presenting a better ideological platform or simply showing through its actions that it has greater competence to perform. While criticizing

the government, the opposition should show that it could have done better by presenting policy alternatives. In its capacity as official opposition, it must check the excess of the government in power, the ultimate purpose being the persuasion of the electorate to vote out the incumbent and put it (the opposition) in power so that it may pursue the policies it believes are best for the nation. In so doing, it must highlight and expose those aspects of the ruling government policies which it believes not to be in the national interest. It must be the watch dog by exposing the abuse of executive power, bureaucracy and red tapism, issues of breach of human rights, waste of public funds, and stimulate robust democratic debate.

Hon. Bagbin is of the opinion that the opposition should be fair in its criticism of government policies, and provide alternative proposals as to the best way forward, the opposition has the responsibility to uphold and defend the sovereignty, unity and the national integrity of the country. It should, therefore, not engage in activities that could undermine the unity and stability of the state. He summarized the functions of the opposition thus: "...the opposition has equal responsibility as the government to protect, defend and uphold the constitutional order, the rule of law and the peace and stability of the nation".

Looking at the above stance of the Honorable leader of the opposition in Ghana's parliament, there is no doubt why Ghana's democracy is doing very well when compared to Nigeria's. Yet Ghana is a developing democracy. The Nigerian opposition so far seems stuck at only one function - oppose, oppose and oppose everything without providing a viable alternative/option.

5. POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN THE FOURTH REPUBLIC

The fourth republic in Nigeria has witnessed the transition of power to three (3) presidents on the platform of the same ruling party - the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Power was transmitted to Chief Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo in 1999, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2007 and Dr. Goodluck Azikiwe Ebele Jonathan after the death of Yar'Adua in 2009. Thereafter, he (the latter) won the next general election in 2011. At the inception of the fourth republic there were only a few registered political parties, but with the passage of time, the number blossomed to sixty registered political parties among which are the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP); Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN); Alliance for Democracy (AD); All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP); Congress for Progressive Change (CPC); Fresh Democratic Party, UNPP, All Progressive Good Alliance (APGA), KOWA party - the list is endless. Fortunately for democracy, some of these afore-mentioned parties have come together to form a new voice for the opposition - the All Progressive Congress (a merger of ACN, CPC and ANPP).

6. OPPOSITION UNDER THE OBASANJO'S ADMINISTRATION

While commending the democratic strides made in Nigeria during the Obasanjo presidency, we make bold to say that political opposition was not a palpable part of our democratic experiment as almost all the parties which contested and lost in the election of the era went back into the cooler to await the next election timetable. Once in a while, there will be a lone voice shouting to be noticed not for the general interest of the nation but for private gains and when settled through appointments, the noise ends. This was a period of sycophantic praises rather than true opposition. The reason for this can be explained by the emerging form of our democracy and the authoritarian nature it assumed then (Epelle, 2003).

However, the only form of seeming opposition that came during this first part of the fourth republic came via the activities of the then former vice president, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar who resigned his post as vice president, decamped from the PDP and joined the Action Congress in 2007. The opposition was more on the pages of national dailies and seldom in the Houses of Assemblies (National and State) as the PDP dominated most of the seats from local Government to federal level almost turning the nation into a one party state (Epelle, 2004).

7. OPPOSITION UNDER YAR'ADUA'S ADMINISTRATION

Opposition under this administration was not much different from that of President Obasanjo. The so called opposition then was more interested in getting "settled" after losing the general elections than fighting for the general interest of the nation. It was under President Yar'Adua that members of the National Assembly agreed together for the interest of their common good to milk this nation dry by increasing their salaries and allowances to the chagrin of the electorate, while teachers and lecturers were on strike due to non-payment of salaries. In this instance, it was the president who became the "opposition" and slashed their abnormal bumper salaries down to a semi-normal one.

8. OPPOSITION UNDER PRESIDENT JONATHAN'S ADMINISTRATION

The opposition under this administration seems to have taken up a new turn. The new found voice of the opposition ironically comes from within the ruling PDP government as members of the party from the rank and file to the top echelon are defecting to the opposition party, APC, with loud noises accompanying their exit. Incidentally, INEC's de-registering of political parties which did not have national character or which has not won any seat nationwide, in the past general elections, seem to be the ember that is fanning this mergers - rather than ideological similarities.

Defections of members from the ruling party to the opposition and from the opposition back to the ruling party without recourse to any ideological question have become the tradition (*The Guardian*, 2014). There has also been much name-calling, insults and abuse of personalities in one government post or the other by the opposition rather than disagreement on policy issues.

From the foregoing, it can be said that Nigeria's opposition is still at its nascent stage. Political opposition in Nigeria can be likened to that of United States of America of 1864 under President Abraham Lincoln when the opposition did nothing but the literal dictionary meaning of the word "OPPOSE". To buttress our point, we shall quote a few lines from the document published by Ralph Fiennes et al on November 25, 1864 in the New York Times in response to the activities of the opposition:

We do not believe that as long as human nature remains what it is, anybody of men can be safely entrusted with power, and the same time shielded from all criticism upon their manner of using it. Liberty cannot be preserved, nor economy of efficiency secured, without the exercise of a somewhat suspicious vigilance on the part of some portion of the public. It was not, therefore, merely because they found fault, that the democrats brought themselves to ruin and confusion, but because they opposed everything the government did or propose to do ... good, bad and indifferent ... to call personal abuse of the president, open instigation of armed resistance to laws, the circulation of slanders against the army and its officers, the distortion of all news, the misrepresentation of every act of the administration, the constant discouragement of all enlistment, the stigmatizing before the country the lawful exercise of his prerogative by the president, such

as the dismissal of a General whom he deemed incompetent, as an outrageous and unjustifiable act, the steady and vigorous justification of the conduct of men who were in arms for the destruction of the government ... to call all these things acts of legitimate constitutional opposition, is an act of insult to common sense; and it is from these things, and not from criticisms, that we hope Democrats will now refrain, for they have so far had no result except to encourage the enemy, and degrade the nation in the eyes of foreigners, and paralyzed its efforts to put down the rebellion.

Judging from the above, the role of the opposition in Nigeria led by the APC (the main opposition party), its utterances on the pages of our national dailies, its call for the blocking of the 2014 Appropriation bill, its unnecessarily frequent appeals to people's sentiments all in a bid to gain sympathy and such like, its silence on issues of national benefit such as providing an alternative to how to solve the problems of corruption, insecurity, power failure, poor infrastructure, rejuvenating the education sector, poverty, kidnapping, Boko Haram insurgency, aborted, irregular and inconclusive elections etc, it will seem that our opposition chose to copy the kind of opposition practised in America 150 years ago. As we can see, American politics has evolved over time and changed from this state of pettiness in opposition as quoted above to something better. It is time the opposition in Nigeria does the same.

In all, we still have to answer the question of whose interest the opposition in Nigeria is representing. From all indications, the opposition in Nigeria is all about itself. It is more concerned with how to get its share of the "national cake" than how to improve the lives of those it claims to represent. This is where we have a problem. The oppositional political elite that claim to be the liberator of this nation from the supposedly bad governance of the PDP has gradually created a state of confusion in the polity, hoodwinking some portion of the populace with its non-ideological ways and thought. Hiding under pseudo-populist slogans, they are gradually building an army of confused followership who will not stop to ask questions but are more interested in the little "primitive accumulation" they too can get.

9. CONCLUSION

In concluding this paper, we will like to recall minding what the opposition represents. Opposition represents, among other things, the watchdog, presenter of the minority views and an alternative government. As the watchdog of the society that is to bring to the notice of the public for the common good of the nation, the opposition has not been able to show the generality of Nigerians the failures in the policies of the incumbent government. It is not enough for any person or group of persons to write supposed failures in the national dailies. The leader of the opposition in the house who is supposed to be the spokesman is to raise such in his motion on the floor of the house (the Hallowed Chambers).

Nigeria, the largest economy in Africa, with an extremely poor population, is blessed with a democracy that has a bumper opposition that shouts when their share of the national cake is denied them. The views they represent are their personal views as they do not interact with their constituencies except towards the end of their tenure when they come home to donate sewing machines to women, barbing clippers to young men and some naira and more promises to the rest, using the forum to ask for fresh mandates to complete the "good jobs" they had started in their first term.

The fourth republic opposition in Nigeria has failed to give this nation an alternative that will address the ills of the government. The opposition has not been able to provide answers to the issues of poverty, failure in the education and health sectors, insecurity, kidnapping, insurgency, housing, power, water, transportation, roads, election rigging and corruption.

Much as we appreciate the role or functions of the opposition, we will also appreciate the fact that the opposition in Nigeria has its own problems. Chief among these problems are recycling of members and “no true opposition”. Members of the opposition and indeed other political parties recycle themselves – defecting from one party to the other then back again. A cursory look at the spate of defections and defectors show that most of the defectors were originally PDP members (*Guardian* 2014) who when not given enough share of “their national cake” move out and come back. Their defections were never based on any ideological shift but “on the conditions that made us go out has been met”. Apart from the above, the issue of no true opposition in Nigeria’s fourth republic is also a disturbing one. In Nigeria’s politics, most of those in opposition have their place in the ruling party. They are, thus, agents of the government planted in the opposition group to cause distractions from its inactivity while causing confusion within the enemy (opposition) camp. A critical look at the so called opposition and many factions they parade lend credence to this fact. While being optimistic that fourth republic Nigeria will one day witness true opposition, yet until they (the opposition) present this nation with a viable and credible alternative to governance and policy failures, their opposing will remain a distraction and not a necessity.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the brief analysis of above discussion, we were able to highlight the functions of the opposition party and answer the questions that arose there from, that are whether they are a necessity or distraction. Consequently, we make the following recommendations with the hope that it will help to create a true and formidable opposition in Nigeria’s current democratic experiment:

- i. Reduction in the number of political parties to three; this will help in reducing the up and down movement of our politicians who are always in a state of flux. This will enable whatever opposition that emerges at the end of the day to be strong and united in its cause;
- ii. Mandatory publication of parties’ ideologies in our national dailies at least two years before any general election and their sticking to such ideologies;
- iii. Establishment of an Institute of Democratic Studies. Such Institute should not be for those who will leave their present work or unemployment to contest and/or be selected into office by their godfathers armed with a fore-knowledge of their fat paychecks and not with the knowledge of their responsibilities, but for those who have chosen politics as their profession;
- iv. Opposition should within three months of every general election publish its alternative proposals and put a shadow government in place; and,
- v. The National Orientation Agency (NOA) should carry out its duties of enlightening the public more seriously.

In all, we hope that if we all work together, Nigeria’s democracy can be an example to other African Nations and the world just as our telecommunication system is today.

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