

## **Political Parties and Credible Elections in Nigeria: Emerging Issues**

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### **Abstract**

Elections and political parties are interwoven in Nigeria as one cannot exist without the other. This is because political parties are the vehicles and platforms through which candidates emerge. Thus, political parties and credible elections are the hallmarks of democracy. However, issues such as internal party democracy and the extensive use of money in the conduct of elections among others in the country have remained a major source of worry for the nation. This paper is set to examine the role of political parties in promoting credible elections as well as the emerging issues that are working against Nigeria's democracy. The paper adopts the secondary source of data and applies structural functionalism as its theoretical framework. Findings revealed that the lack of internal party democracy and electoral malpractices are so endemic that it has affected the growth of democracy and credible elections. The paper therefore recommends a strong strict adherence to the Electoral Act on campaign expenses as a way of sanitizing the polity.

**Keywords:** Election. Democracy, Nigeria, Political parties

## **Introduction**

Politics is seen as the struggle for the control of scarce resources among competing individuals and groups in a society. It is also seen as the authoritative allocation of values. In Nigeria however, the key challenge has been the credibility of the process that brings on board those who are charged with the authority to control and equitably allocate such scarce resources and values to all the citizenry (Osi, 2009). In the same vein, the idea of who governs a state, who benefits from such governance and how best to govern a society is as old as society itself. In contemporary times, democracy seems to have gained ascendancy as the best form of government that has a greater capacity to promote development (Ibaba, 2013). Thus, the best instrument of participation in modern democratic governance is election and this has made election to be almost synonymous with democracy. This accounts for the view that the selection of political representatives by citizens in free, fair and credible elections remains the most essential feature of modern democracy (Martin, Denters and Aarts, 2010). According to Okoko, (2019), elections provide an avenue for citizens to periodically express their will and establish a social contract. However, it is important to note that an election is not an end in itself but a means to the enthronement of a disciplined, patriotic and honest leadership that is capable of driving development in any given society (Okoko, 2019, p.6). He further posits that the way elections are conducted, the perceptions, and the value system surrounding

elections, on the one hand, and the strength of the democratic institution on the other hand are fundamentally responsible for the governance deficit being experienced in Nigeria and this paper shares in that same view.

Also, there has been a trend of greater democratization in the world in the past decades and this has made many countries engage at different stages of economic, political and socio-cultural reforms. , Nigeria is not an exception as it tries to surmount its numerous problems that resulted in the poor performances of the political parties, their candidates and the lack of credible elections majorly due to the existence of a political class that is doing everything possible to suppress the will and aspirations of the populace including tampering with the election processes. Nevertheless, in a democracy, elections and political parties are very vital in allowing people to take charge of their affairs. Thus, election is likened to the road that leads to government offices where decisions are made on behalf of the people while, the political parties serve as the vehicles that travel the road (Ereke and Ogedengbe, 2016). Hence it has become imperative to emphasize the credibility of the process. Therefore, credible elections have become very central to who will control the nation and preside over the allocation of its scarce resources. As we all know elections are the most acceptable means through which responsive leadership is enthroned in present democracies around the world. The political parties and the electorates remain major actors that cannot be ignored in the political process of

Nigeria (Uchechukwu and Victor, 2020) as the former present the candidates and the latter decide those that will emerge as winners. Based on the aforementioned, this paper is divided into the following parts conceptual clarifications, theoretical framework, the role of political parties in promoting credible elections in Nigeria, emerging issues in Nigeria's democracy, conclusion and recommendations.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **Political Parties**

A political party is one of those concepts that has numerous definitions. According to (Anifowose and Enemuoh 2005, p.195), it refers to a group of people who are bonded in policy and opinion in support of a general political cause which is aimed at the pursuit, capture and retention for as long as democratically feasible, of government and in office. By implication, a political party refers to a group that seeks to elect candidates to public office by supplying them with a label, which is the party identity by which they will be known by the electorates. Therefore, a political party is at least three things to its members and non-members: (i) a label in the minds of its members and the general public especially the electorate; (ii) an organization that recruits and campaigns for candidates that are seeking election and selection into public political office; (iii) a set of leaders that try to organize and

control the legislature and executive branches of government (Wilson, 1992, p.13 cited in Anifowose and Enemu, 2005).

Generally, political parties are permanent institutions that have the goal of aggregating interest, presenting candidates for elections to control governments and representing such interests in government. Thus, it is a major vehicle for the enhancement of governance in a society. This was corroborated by International IDEA (2001) when it posits that political parties are an important component of liberal democracy and competitive electoral processes. In other words, the parties provide the candidates and set the agenda and issues within which the elections are to be contested from one election year to another. However, political parties in Nigeria have not advanced meaningfully as they remain merely a vehicle for reaching political offices. In addition, they are part of the problem of bad governance due to their desperation to win elections at all costs hence their adoption of corrupt tendencies to circumvent their party constitution (Omilusi, 2009). Therefore, without political parties, elections would be meaningless to society. Thus, the history of the electoral process in Nigeria goes hand in hand with the development and role of political parties as party politics in the entire electoral process cannot be over-emphasized (Ereke and Ogedengbe, 2016, p.116).

## **Election**

Just like political parties, the election is also a concept that has a plethora of definitions. Elections are regarded as an important institutional mechanism of democracy through which political leaders derive their legitimacy. According to Udu (2015), elections generally represent the means of measuring political expression and the exercise of state power that is legitimized and accepted as being the basis of people's consent. Thus, the election is defined as a means by which a large body of people are to choose a fewer number from that body as their representatives to undertake specific tasks and, it can be obtainable in a wider variety of organizations (Udu, Nkwede and Ezekwe, 2015). According to Ejumudo (2010c), the election is a special means by which citizens of a given country choose their representatives according to the dictates of modern democracies.

According to Duruji and Segun cited in Ajayi and Fashagba (2014, p.256), modern democracies can only be meaningful through the electoral process which guarantees citizens the avenue to participate in governance either by selecting those who are invested with the authority to preside over affairs of the state for a specified period or through direct decision making in matters of policy and constitution through initiatives or referendum. Through periodic elections, state officials are held to account for their stewardship in governance. As modern governments strive to be democratic, where the consent of the people confers legitimacy to the ruling elite, the election has become a vital instrument in that process.

However, elections in Nigeria right from the first republic till the present democratic dispensation have been acrimonious and fraught with accusations and counter-accusations. According to Uchechukwu and Victor, (2020), it has been characterized by religious and ethnic colourations, hate speech, trivial arguments on certificates, age, and other petty issues by political parties and their candidates; as pre-elections and post-election periods have always generated so much tension thereby overheating the polity. For Peterside, (2020, p.123), the negative aspects of elections in Nigeria such as fraud, ballot box snatching, over-voting, thuggery etc, have been revolutionized, modernized and institutionalized as a normal phenomenon in the national electoral process thereby eroding credibility and casting doubts on the outcomes generally.

Similarly, credible election is the process that deepens democracy. Talking about credibility in Nigeria's election translates to putting a square peg in a round hole as they do not go together because man by nature is selfish and aggressive and on issues that involve the sharing of scarce resources, credibility will be the last recourse. Therefore, credibility is the one major feature that is lacking in Nigeria's electoral process as history has shown that elections generally end up in an avalanche of allegations of fraud and massive rigging by those, who cash in on the fraud-prone electoral system to thwart the will of the people. Even the introduction of modern technology into the electoral process has not changed the situation to date. This lack

of credibility has ended up in dire consequences for the nation as today the country parades arrays of leaders who came into office with little or nothing to offer Nigerians as dividends of democracy (Peterside 2020, p.126). Rather, they perpetuate themselves in office without being duly elected thanks to the series of electoral frauds that are committed in connivance with the candidates, the political parties, the staff of the electoral body and sometimes even judges from the judiciary who sometimes give questionable judgements that further erodes whatever little credibility that is perceived of the process. In addition, those in power impose their successors on the citizens who must emerge victorious whether voted into power or mostly rigged into office while, they now preside as political godfathers that decide the faith of everyone and everything in the society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopts the Structural Functionalist Theory in its analysis. It was developed by the trio of Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parson and Robert Merton and will help us to explain the functions of structures in a political system since we're all aware that every system has structures that are expected to function accordingly to create a balance. Therefore, once one of the structures changes, it will invariably distort the balance and cause some level of disequilibrium in the system which will remain until a balance is restored (Mahajan, 1988). As regards Nigeria's election, the electoral management body which is the Independent National Electoral



Commission (INEC), has consistently failed in its functions thereby giving room for manipulative and fraudulent elections to become recurring in every election it conducts. Thus, a political party's involvement in election manipulation is dysfunctional and creates chaos in any society.

Merton further posits that some of the functions are manifest functions as they are intended and recognized but that there is also the existence of latent functions that are unintended and unrecognized. This creates a social pattern that contributes to the maintenance of a political system that is regarded as functional while, those that have negative consequences are considered dysfunctional (Adejoh 2009, p.45). It can correctly be said that the consistent negative consequences that have been witnessed in Nigeria today are an affirmation of decades of its dysfunctional processes that make it a dysfunctional nation.

Parson on its part argued that the structural functionalist theory can be seen as a political system that is made up of different but interrelated parts. These parts are supposed to work harmoniously to ensure the survival of the whole system. Therefore, when related to politics, structural functionalism can best describe the basic functions of the political structures in a political system that serves as a tool of investigation (Mahajan, 1988). Since the political system is made up of parts, the structural-functional method fully explains the relationship between the parts or structures on the one hand and the relationship between the parts and the whole

(political system) on the other hand. Thus, the structure is many and can take different forms. It is this contribution of each part (structure) that helps to sustain the political system (whole). Corroborating this position Adejoh, (2009), posits that numerous structures are seen in different forms and work together to keep the entire political process functioning

Therefore, in establishing the importance of this theory to this paper, the political parties and the electoral process are seen as the structures in the Nigerian political system. For a political system to be effective and credible, every structure in the society must perform its functions effectively and efficiently. Therefore, political parties and the election process are not an exception as they must function appropriately for our democratic values to be sustained in Nigeria. Political parties are expected to recruit competent, tested and credible individuals into their leadership strata while the electoral process is to be presided by an independent electoral body that is expected to conduct free, fair and credible elections that will produce legitimate leadership to run the affairs of the country, However, experiences have shown that both the political parties and the electoral body are today engage in certain actions and activities that distort their functions thereby causing disequilibrium in the Nigerian polity and resulting in political apathy within the nation.

Similarly, Aristotle posits that man is a social animal that resides in a society and is influenced by others and vice versa. This means that man is not an island unto itself and in the course of living together the different ideologies they believe in will create and result in incompatible ideologies, views, opinions etc. Hence, there is a tendency that such interaction will result in conflict over time. Similarly, people come from different backgrounds and this creates a diverse viewpoint that leads to disagreement. Therefore, this plays a role in the harmonization and structuring of societies as it is the belief that any society that has never experienced conflict is not normal. But, as the human population continues to rise and resources available continue to shrink, people battle one another and struggle for survival or ownership of these resources. Since people must interact and encounter each other and the society is made up of varied networks of different personalities daily thus, interactions are inevitable as society advances so does conflict too. Furthermore, the existence of unequal resources in society leads to strife and contestation amongst the citizenry. The effort to satisfy self is part of an inert biological trait in man that in most cases causes desperation in the electoral processes in Nigeria where candidates must emerge victorious at all costs.

### **The Role of Political Parties in Promoting Credible Elections in Nigeria**

It has been reiterated that democracy cannot function effectively without political parties since it's the political parties that recruit candidates that become leaders and

eventually organize government hence, they are very essential in the workings of democracy (Omilusi, 2009) and are seriously interwoven. It is also worthy to note that in Africa and Nigeria in particular, political parties are also part of the problem of bad governance because of the negative roles they play in society. In most cases, political parties initiate corrupt processes by going all out to buy votes, bribe officials of the electoral body both permanent and ad hoc, recruit thugs to perpetrate violence, detach themselves from societal interest when they get into power and become ineffective in solving the country's numerous problems. Just like the Nigerian factor or effect, political parties are today even more corrupt than the society they operate in.

Since present-day democracy cannot function effectively without political parties and, as an important institutional component of democracy, they are expected to drive a competitive electoral process by producing credible, well tested and competent candidates as their flag bearers, set agendas that are issues-based within the ambit of the electoral system, perform all its electoral functions and duties efficiently and effectively.

Therefore, for political parties to contribute meaningfully in promoting credible elections in Nigeria both in process and outcome as major stakeholders that they are, political parties should among other things:

- Strengthen their structures by adhering strictly to their constitutions which all must respect and comply with regardless of their status or position in the party.
- Political parties are to enshrine, practice, and promote internal democracy in all their operations as their cardinal principle as this will promote a level playing field for all members within the party regardless of an individual's monetary worth.
- Political parties should desist from giving their electoral slots to the highest bidder or to candidates that must come to power by all means as this will help in checkmating 'do or die' politics where people who lost out in their party primaries move to other parties to contest election as this will promote credible electoral process and lessen acrimonious relationship during and after the election.
- Provide independent and credible dispute resolution mechanisms within their party structures aimed at resolving disputes that stem as a result of primaries. This will reduce the bitter battles witnessed within some political parties in the build-up to elections, especially after the party primaries.

### **Emerging Issues in Nigeria's Democracy Today**

As days roll into years, so has Nigeria's return to democracy in this fourth republic churned out different issues that threaten the sustainability of the democratic

dispensation through certain actions and inactions of the key players. Some of these are as follows:

- Internal party democracy – this is not entirely a new issue but it has become a recurring one in every election year. The electoral process is all-encompassing and covers issues like party congresses, nomination of candidates etc. However, most political parties find it so difficult to conduct their affairs within the democratic process as expected. This has led to the introduction and adoption of consensus candidates which is more like an imposition of candidates on the party and by extension on the nation especially where such candidate emerges victorious, and this has today become the norm in Nigeria's democracy. Even though this consensus style had created deep-seated resentment and intra-party squabbles within the political parties and should be discarded, it has been maintained, adopted, and applied in almost all positions. For instance, the emergence of the immediate past Chairman of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC), Senator Abdullahi Adamu was based on consensus/imposition style and he had to resign a few months later due to the bad blood that was associated with his emergence. This scenario is not limited to the ruling party as the main opposition party the People's Democratic Party (PDP) has also been embroiled in leadership tussles in the past making the major political parties parade Chairmen that operate in acting capacities.

The aforementioned is proof that it's difficult to enforce internal democracy in political parties and this also rubs off on the credibility of elections. This can be attributed to the massive influence, power and resources that some of the members of political parties wield and control. In addition, this has made it quite difficult for those in power to only serve a term in office as they forcefully serve out the two terms and also bring on board their preferred candidates to take over from them even when their performances in government are very poor. This is mostly done for selfish interests as against the interest of the masses, especially where such elected governors didn't do well in office during their tenure.

- High nomination fees – political parties in the bid to raise funds for the day-to-day activities of their offices sell forms to candidates that are contesting for various categories of offices. Over the years, the prices for such forms have become outrageous and beyond the reach of many Nigerians who have the capacity and willingness to contribute their quota to the development of our nation. This paper sees this as a ploy by those in power to deliver the country to the rich at the exclusion of many.

For instance, the ruling party the APC nomination form for the 2023 presidential election was put at 100 million naira, while the main opposition party (PDP) pegged theirs at 40 million naira. This paper strongly feels that the exorbitant amount encourages and promotes corruption within the system

as many political appointees of the ruling party paid and obtained this expression of interest form including the former Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria Mr Godwin Emiefele; who is currently in detention and is been tried for mismanagement of the nation's resources. The question is how and where did a government employee get such an amount from? The answer will be through corrupt means. Therefore, anyone who pays such a humongous amount will be willing to circumvent the process to emerge as the winner, and where such happens, the individual will first recoup his investment with profits before serving the interest of the country and the electorate. This therefore explains why this fourth republic successfully made Nigeria the poverty headquarters of the world in almost twenty-four years after the return to democratic rule.

- Massive electoral manipulation – another point to note is that election serves as a means of participation of citizens in the establishment of a social contract as power is sourced from the people. In this regard, free, fair and credible elections enable citizens to remove inefficient government and this serves as an incentive for political leaders to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people. However, it has been very difficult for the electorates in Nigeria to effectively participate in voting into power candidates of their choice as electoral manipulation has moved to another level entirely where the citizens



are chased away from the polling units by armed political thugs who engage in massive thump printing of ballot papers on behalf of their political parties or godfather. In addition, election results are even written on the eve of polls or before the commencement of voting by the electorates in connivance with corrupt officials and supposed winners are foisted on the citizenry even when they were never voted into power. This scenario is working negatively against the country's democracy as voter turnout in general elections is decreasing and the credibility of the process is permanently been questioned or smeared.

- Internationalization of local political issues- the country's politics has also witnessed a rise in the movement, negotiation and discussion of local issues outside the shores of the nation by key political actors. This was evident by the activities of a group of aggrieved five governors who formed an 'Integrity Group' against their presidential candidate Alhaji Atiku Abubakar. The group was led by the former governor of Rivers State Mr Nyesom Wike and they jetted out severally to the United Kingdom, and other foreign lands on what they call strategic meetings (Francis et al, 2022). These PDP governors also met the presidential aspirant of the ruling party where they sold out their party for personal interest and, today Mr. Wike serves in an opposition government as the minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). This paper strongly believes that the actions of Nigerian politicians are strictly for their selfish

interest and have nothing to do with service to the nation; as this explains why the majority of the citizenry still live in poverty. Similarly, all the major presidential aspirants embarked on foreign trips to one country or the other, instead of engaging their constituencies on how best they intend to move the country forward. It can be correct to say that the numerous foreign trips by major political actors did not attract any major positive impact on the lives of the citizens as over two decades of the return to democratic dispensation has left many Nigerians worse off presently.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

From the foregoing, it is imperative to conclude that political parties and elections are inseparable, interwoven and fundamentally related as one cannot function effectively without the other. This paper has argued on the place of political parties and credible elections in Nigeria. It posits that for Nigeria to grow its democracy and sustain the same, we must have disciplined and focus-oriented political parties comprising of men and women that have proven integrity, tested and trusted.

Political parties should recruit candidates that have proven integrity with the capacity to perform effectively and efficiently as flag bearers into the various political parties as against money bags that will hijack and make the parties personal property. Nigerians must resist the manipulations of money bags who buy overvotes

from rural areas and stop non-performing candidates from continuing in government.

That credible election in the country is possible if all staff of the electoral body will shun corrupt tendencies, and work within the rules and regulations guiding their activities. Anything short of strict adherence should result in the scrapping of the electoral body.

All Nigerians should expose all fraudulent activities that are connected to elections before, during and after the elections as this will go a long way in checkmating the level of fraud in the system.

Since the election is the most legitimate means through which the citizenry can decide who leads them under a democracy, Nigeria should appoint credible individuals to man the electoral body, ensure the credibility of the process by exposing all those who are thwarting the process and allowing the law to take its full course on them.

The National Assembly should enact punitive laws against all electoral frauds and empower the electoral body with some level of autonomy and independence to enable it to function effectively and efficiently.

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