

Party Politics and National Integration in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Abstract

This paper recognizes that political parties are agents of interest aggregation, and argues that the Nigerian party should be such that offers a platform for the intercourse of interests, out of which, interest aggregation could occur, particularly, on the ways that the structure and process of governance in the country could lead to national integration. Intra-party politics would then become the articulation of positions by members and the competition among these positions on the issues of national integration, leading to the aggregation of particular positions by each party on the diverse issues confronting the nation at any period. Inter-party politics then becomes the competition among the parties over which of their positions will become the basis of governance and policy for the purpose of national integration in the country. Unfortunately as the paper observes, this is not the situation in Nigeria. Using qualitative methodology, the paper finds that instead, party politics has not been the platform for interest aggregation but rather one for interest disarticulation, and has as such, continued to promote national disharmony and aggravate conflicts and crises in the country. The paper recommends that the political party as well as party politics in Nigeria must be restructured such that both can serve as agents of achieving and consolidating unity in diversity and contribute to the resolution of the numerous challenges of national integration in the country.

Keywords: Political Party, Party Politics, National Integration, Interest Aggregation, Nigeria.

Introduction

A plethora of issues concerning national integration in Nigeria today points to the complicity of political parties in the quagmire. Bello-Imam (1987) defines national integration as "... the harmonized co-existence of diverse social groups, under the polity, be they classes or ethnic or interest groups, under some consistent national values or objectives in order to consolidate the unity of their people into 'one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation'" (pp. 266-267). The need for national integration in Nigeria has existed ever since European colonizers forcefully brought together disparate

peoples as members of the same territories in Africa. The effort to build these disparate peoples into harmonious whole has not materialized in most countries of Africa even after decades of independence. In these years, the absence of national integration has brought all manner of crisis in the countries.

In Nigeria, this crisis in recent times has manifested in the Boko Haram insurgency, Niger Delta militancy, farmers-herders clashes, indigene-settler conflagrations, among other developments detracting from the sanctity of the Nigerian state. The provision for political parties devoid of overt ethno-religious and other primordial cleavages under the 1979 constitution in the country was in line with encouraging political parties to contribute to the goal of national integration (Awofeso, 2014: 192). Almost forty years after, political parties in Nigeria are yet to transform from the regional and sectional political parties of the First Republic, to having a more broad-based and national outlook. Currently, there are more than 100 registered political parties in Nigeria, and only the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) can be described as national parties in any real sense of the word.

A political party can be seen as a grouping of individuals with a common principle by which they expect to capture political power and serve the national interest. Political parties are at the core of the political process in every democratic country. As in all such countries, politics in Nigeria is played according to the outlooks of the parties. As Huntington (1968: 408) argues, 'the stability of a modernizing political system depends on the strength of its political parties'. Dalton and Wattenberg (2000: 275) similarly observe that 'it remains difficult to think of national governments functioning without parties playing a significant role in connecting the various elements of the political process'. In fact, political parties in a country are expected to champion issues that border on national integration, such as ensuring inclusivity among the members from different sections of the country, as well as building consensus among members from every section of the country on national issues.

Nigeria's Fourth Republic at inception in 1999 featured three political parties, namely, Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Peoples Party (APP) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). These three political parties were the only political associations that met the conditions for official registration as political parties, which basically required the associations to secure 5% in at least 2/3 of 36 states in the 1998 local government elections contested by nine political associations as prescribed by the electoral commission. The trend of that election underscored the outlook of the registered political parties. The Alliance for Democracy typified the Action Group and the Unity Party of Nigeria in the first and second republics respectively. This party dominated the governorship elections in the six south-western states of Nigeria.

The All Peoples Party on the other hand approximated a section of the dominant Northern parties of earlier republics. In the 1999 gubernatorial elections, this party won in the four north-western states – Zamfara, Sokoto, Kaduna and Kebbi; three north-eastern states – Borno, Gombe and Yobe; and two north-central states – Kogi and Kwara. The Peoples Democratic Party emerged as a broad-based political party, incorporating elements of earlier northern parties as well as elements from the East. Not surprisingly, the party secured victory across these and other geo-political zones in the country in 1999. This manner of winning among the parties foreshadowed the attitude of parties to national integration in Nigeria in the Fourth Republic. Although the parties were registered on the basis of national spread, on take-off they immediately became champions of sectional interests.

The various sections of the country found abode in one or the other of these parties. The Southwest found a home in AD, while sections of the North became domiciled in either APP or PDP, and the Southeast went into the PDP. Although new political parties came on board along the way and some other parties transformed into new ones since 1999, Nigerian political parties have essentially continued to retain this sectional character. In 2007, the AD transformed into the Action Congress and after the general elections that year, again transformed into the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), yet the party retained its Southwest/Yoruba character. The APP transformed into the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) but retained its posture as a northern party. In 2013, the AD and the ANPP together with a section of PDP joined to form a new party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), but even this new party immediately took the coloration of a North-Southwest coalition. The PDP itself became like a North-Southeast alliance.

Politics in the country under the above structure has ultimately given rise to a situation where sections of the country whose party wins national elections will feel that they have captured the reins of the country whereas the other sections whose parties lose out at elections have the feeling that they are marginalized. These feelings of domination and marginalization have pervaded Nigeria's political landscape in the Fourth Republic, and have been directly antithetical to the integration of the various groups in the country. It's the implications of party politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic for national integration that this paper seeks to interrogate.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper utilizes the structural-functional theory in discussing party politics and its implication for national integration in Nigeria. Structural-functionalism argues that a political system is made up of structures and functions, and holds that it is how well the structures perform their roles in the political system that determines how well society

works (Almond, 1965). Two broad functions can be identified in a political system namely, input functions, which include interest articulation and interest aggregation as well as political socialization and communication, and, output functions – rule making, rule application and rule adjudication (Fisher, 2010: 76). Input functions are properly in the realm of political parties in a democratic system. For instance, political parties are among the structures that carry out political socialization in society, and serve as the quintessential agencies for interest articulation and interest aggregation.

Structures exist in the political system for the performance of the functions above. The continuous survival of the political system, nay society, is contingent on structures performing requisite functions without strains on the political system (Onah, 2010, p. 58). In utilizing this theory, this paper's concern is on the centrality of the functions of interest articulation and interest aggregation to stimulating integration in heterogeneous societies. Interest groups articulate interests in society and such interest groups are often found in the political parties, as informal political groupings and the factions within the parties, each with interests to pursue or protect. Political parties are supposed to aggregate these interests as well as the other interests in society. When the parties aggregate the interests well enough, they can become agencies of consensus among the various groups belonging to them as members.

The party must first be the agency where internal consensus of interests is built among groups with different interests. Then the parties are expected to champion the consensus within their groups in the competition with the other parties within the political system. The competition between the parties – during elections, will then become a competition among the various interests championed by the different parties. Once a party emerges victorious at the elections and forms the government, it is expected that it will implement the consensus already forged within it, mediated by the alternative consensus championed by the alternative political parties. It is such consensus that can form the bedrock for national integration. However, the challenge of national integration in heterogeneous countries like Nigeria is evident not just in the competition of diverse social, political, economic and other interests among the constituent groups in the society, but aggravated by the inability of political parties and other institutions of the political system to reconcile interests for societal harmony.

Political parties also carry out other input functions in the political system, many of which they do in the form of political communication- passing out appropriate messages to their members and followers on how to conduct themselves in the political process. How well the political parties do this could engender the right attitude to national integration in the country. The political system also has a conversion process, through which the political system converts inputs into outputs (Onah, 2010: 57). The output functions are the forte of the government, and it is the parties that transform into

the government after elections. While the winning party transforms into the government, the losing parties become the opposition. The ruling party has the opportunity while in government to transform inputs, especially in the form of programmes and policy proposals, into outputs that help achieve national consensus and integration, while the opposition parties will also proffer alternative platforms on these issues.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA

National integration refers to the process of unifying a polity into a harmonious state (Duverger, 1972). Coleman and Roseberg (1964: 9) define national integration as the “progressive reduction of cultural and regional tensions and discontinuities...in the process of creating a homogenous political community”. Zolberg (1967) identifies two perspectives to the understanding of national integration, namely, the pluralist approach based on the American experience which emphasizes the emergence of a new identity through the intersection or consensus of identities; and, the assimilationist approach traceable to the French experience which is the erosion of primitive identities and the emergence of a fresh national identity (p. 451). Similar to the pluralist approach is Neumann’s (1976) conception of national integration, surmised as the accommodationist approach, which is not the emergence of nation but the absence of threat of secession in a heterogeneous society and the respect for diversity.

The crisis of national integration in Nigeria, like other post-colonial states in Africa, can be traced to the scramble for and the partition of Africa prior to formal colonialism. Emerson (1966) asserts that the territorial boundaries of the states created by the eventual colonial powers were at variance with ethnic divisions across these countries (p. 267). This ensured the creation of heterogeneous states, with some of the ethnic groups separated by territorial boundaries, leading to the rise of trans-border ethnic groups (Onah, 2012). In the light of the realities that confronted the typical colonial state in Africa, the colonial officials claimed to try to bring about national integration in the colonial territories. Colonial policy was allegedly directed towards this purpose. Thus, when political parties were permitted in these territories, the parties were expected to work in that direction. Perhaps for a time, they did just that, because prior to independence, political parties were largely united in the fight to evict the colonial masters, but as self-government and independence approached, cracks became noticeable in the parties.

By the time of independence, the parties in African countries were largely split on ethnic and/or religious lines. In Nigeria, the parties at independence had ethnic colorations. The First Republic in Nigeria featured numerous political parties, including three major parties and several minor ones, which ultimately coalesced into two major coalitions or alliances, namely, the Northern People’s Congress- led Nigerian National

Alliance (NNA), and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens/Action Group- led United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA). The coalitions showed that while the NNA sought to protect northern, Muslim interests, UPGA strived to protect southern, Christian interests. Political parties were thus promoting ethnic and regional interests over and above national interests. When therefore the primordial interests of the respective parties/coalitions clashed, the national interest was easily relegated.

The nature of the state and the character of the political parties bequeathed in the aftermath of colonialism represent a challenge to national integration in most heterogeneous post-colonial states. Desperate contestation for power and the consequential access to the control of the state were realities of the post-colonial state, and these were perpetually influenced by primordial factors and the sentiments they generate. This character has made parties in the country to always strive to represent the narrow interests of some ethnic and religious groups rather than broad national interests, and this affects the actions of the state, making the state appear to always be beholden to particular ethnic or religious interests. A corollary of the above is that ethnicity became politicized and politics ethnicized, thereby making the quest for unity or nationhood a herculean challenge. People became more loyal to the ethnic group, often at the expense of the nation.

Birch (1989) categorizes national integration efforts into direct measures such as the proliferation of symbols of national identity such as constitutional provisions, flags, anthems; through political socialization, political institutions/representative projects; and reactive measures to minimize the potency of ethnic differences such as legislations against discrimination, democracy, government policies (pp. 40-43). The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) defines the goal of national integration to include the absence of discrimination on the basis of one's ethnic or linguistic origin, respect for freedom of movement and occupation of citizens across the country, loyalty to the country over one's ethnic group (Chapter 2, paragraph 15). Further efforts at engendering national integration in Nigeria have included the adoption of the federal character principle, implementation of quota system, and power-sharing arrangements such as zoning.

From the foregoing, it is clear that effective management of national integration efforts to achieve the aim of harmonious coexistence could depend to a large extent on the role of political parties. The nature of political contestation in the First Republic was antithetical to national integration however, as the major political parties had their support base largely concentrated in a region (AG – Western region, NPC – Northern region, and NCNC – Eastern region), and was thus designed to advance and protect the interest of the region (Akinboye and Anifowose, 1999). Awolowo in underscoring the nature of party politics in the First Republic maintained that it was ignorance that would

make some people to believe that he can become a leader of Nigeria only if he renounced his leadership of the Yorubas, because one could not become a leader of the country if he were rejected by those among whom he was born, since one's credentials for ruling the whole country will not exist if he failed with a small group (Awolowo, 1981).

Events that led to the collapse of the First Republic such as the 1962 AG crisis, 1962/63 census crisis, 1964 federal crisis and Operation Weti'e in the Western region highlight the ethnic nature of party politics in the First Republic. In 1966, after it became clear that the political parties in Nigeria were destabilizing agents instead, the Nigerian Army struck in a coup and took over the government of the country. The new regime abolished the political parties of the First Republic as well as outlawed political activities generally. Military rule then lasted till 1979, when power was handed back to politicians following general elections in the country that year. For the 1979 elections, five political parties had official recognition in the country, namely, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP), the Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP), and the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP).

The transformation of political parties in Nigeria from largely being an instrument of advancing ethnic interests to more broad-based parties began with requirements for the registration of political parties in the buildup to the 1979 general elections. The Federal Electoral Commission, FEDECO, directed prospective political parties to avoid discrimination of potential members on the basis of sex, ethnic group, religion and place of origin. Other notable conditions for registration included avoiding ethnic or religious symbols in the party's logo or motto, having the headquarters of the party in the federal capital, as well as reflecting federal character in the leadership of the political parties. Sections 201 to 202 of the 1979 Constitution prescribed conditionalities such as ban on the use of emotive ethnic symbols, name and motto by political parties; location of the headquarters of political parties in the federal capital territory; absence of discrimination on membership of political parties on the basis of sex, religion and gender (Awofeso, 2014, 192).

These conditionalities however failed to limit the ethnic composition of political parties, as the Second Republic political parties ultimately reflected the political parties and associations in the First Republic. Thus, although in registering the parties there was a desire to avoid a repeat of the circumstances that led to the intrusion of the military in politics in 1966, after the 1979 elections, it became clear that these parties were largely regional-based, especially going by the states they controlled in the country respectively. The National Party of Nigeria controlled the federal government in addition to about seven states located in the Northwest and Minority areas of the North and South. The Unity Party of Nigeria controlled the Southwestern states; the Nigeria Peoples Party

controlled the Southeastern states, while the Great Nigeria Peoples Party controlled the Northeastern states. The Peoples Redemption Party controlled Kano state.

Osaghae (1998) argues that the need to ensure smooth transition to civil rule and maintain political stability informed the failure to implement the conditionalities for party registration to the letter and this led to failure to produce national political parties (p. 123). This sentiment was proved in the manner in which the candidate of the National Party of Nigeria was controversially declared winner of the 1979 presidential election. Not having the required national spread, it was no wonder that none of them could meet the requirements for victory in the election. When no party was able to win the constitutional spread of votes, Alhaji Shehu Shagari was declared as elected despite failing to meet the 25% of total votes in two-third of the states of the federation. Nothing seemed to have changed, and the political parties in Nigeria were still as destabilizing to the system as ever.

The civilians proved they were not good at managing national integration. The crises of national integration in Nigeria at this time manifested in such problems as political instability, political violence and religious crises, farmers-herders crisis, indigeneship-settler confrontations, and widespread communal violence, among others, reflecting the failure of civilian governments to achieve the goals of national integration as espoused in the constitution. So, after a general election in 1983 that was widely condemned for falling very short of democratic tenets, the Nigerian military struck again and took power in 1983. Then, in 1987, the military government decided on a programme to hand power back to civilians. Between 1987 and 1993, the military government of the country carried out a long-winding transition process that ultimately featured a two-party system in the country (Diamond, Kirk-Greene and Oyediran, 1997).

Two political parties were registered in this period, namely, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). The transition programme however, ultimately failed when presidential elections in 1993 were annulled just as the SDP was set to emerge victorious. Ironically, the 1993 presidential election offered the parties a rare chance of building up national integration from the consensus that the election generated among Nigerians based on the wide spread of the votes received by the presumed winner, Chief Moshood Abiola. The military then embarked upon another tortuous transition, between 1996 and 1998, during which five political parties were registered. These parties, aptly described pejoratively as “five fingers of a leprous hand”, eventually turned out to be instruments in the hands of the then maximum military leader, General Sani Abacha, to transform himself into a civilian president (Omitola, 2003). That transition also failed when the maximum leader suddenly died in 1998.

General Abdulsalam Abubakar replaced General Abacha as Head of State, and the Abdulsalam military government immediately initiated a transition process that was designed to return the country to democratic rule in 1999. The long years of effective continuous military rule that spanned the Babangida years through the Abacha years ultimately gave out the military as no better managers of national integration than the civilians. By the time that Abacha died, the country was tottering on the brink of collapse as discordant voices were loudly heard from all corners questioning the very existence of the country. The crises of national integration in Nigeria at this time manifesting in the farmers-herders crisis, indigeneship-settler confrontations, Niger Delta insurgency, and cries of marginalization and self-determination from the Southeast, among others, was a reflection of the failure of the military to achieve the goals of national integration as espoused in the constitution. It was therefore with relief that Nigerians welcomed the new democratic rule that took off in 1999.

PARTY POLITICS IN THE 4TH REPUBLIC AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA

Political parties are instruments for the contestation for power at local, state and federal levels. Periodic contestations for power, usually during elections, is what eventually decide which party transforms into the government, and which others become the opposition. At these periods of power contestations, the parties engage in heightened activities, and virtually every member is involved in the effort to make the party victorious. The sum total of what the parties do at all these and other times is what is referred to as party politics. Party politics in Nigeria can be understood from two perspectives namely intra-party politics and inter-party politics. Intra-party politics is concerned with the contestation for power within the political parties at the level of leadership formation and the nominations of party candidates in elections. Intra-party politics refers to the dynamics involved in the contestation for power within a political party. It is concerned with the internal relationships of power among party members.

Intra- party politics covers all activities involved in the internal affairs of a party. These internal activities of the party are supposed to enhance inclusivity within the party, such that the party will attract members across groups and regions in the country. These various groups will come with their divergent political interests which the party will then aggregate to come up with a party position on issues. It is this attitude of inclusivity that a party can then transform into a sense of national integration among members. When a political party can foster a sense of national integration among its members, the internal affairs are run according to best practices. There will be a consensus among members at all times to work for nation instead of the interests of their particular groups, and the party becomes a true agent of interest aggregation.

In the Fourth Republic however, the dominant feature of parties has been a tendency towards the few who can devote more resources in the political arena taking control of the structures of the party. Such resources include time and money, and the few people who can provide the resources the party needs for organizational purposes and other activities such as elections have tended to lead the parties. This tendency towards elite control or, the elite nature of political parties (Gunther and Diamond, 2001) as manifested in Nigeria has ensured that the internal democratic processes of political parties have largely been subjected to the dominance and control of party big-wigs. This is reflected in the crisis bedeviling Nigerian parties (Ayoade, 2008), including the imposition of candidates by godfathers or incumbents, in parties where single elite groups are in control; and factionalization in political parties, where several elite groups exist and are in contention.

Inter-party politics on the other hand feature competition among political parties for the ultimate prize of state power and the control of the machinery of government. In the competition among the parties for state power and the control of the machinery of government, the elites dominating the various parties have relied on their resources to mobilize the structures of the party and manipulate such primordial sentiments as ethnicity and religion to win votes for themselves or their cohorts in the parties. This has led to the godfather syndrome in Nigerian politics whereby a godfather can utilize his political structure and money to literally buy electoral victory for himself or his cohorts. Money politics is even proving to be the basis for the exclusion of a great majority of Nigerians from the political process (Onah and Nwali, 2018).

Elite control of party politics in Nigeria has indeed harmed the ability of political parties to contribute significantly to national integration. Once the elite run into trouble, either within the party, or with other parties, they quickly call up the bogey of ethnicity and or religion. Their failures and incompetence are mystified in ethnic or religious covers. The recourse to ethnicity and religion by these elite parties has proven very divisive in Nigerian politics, often bringing heightened tensions in the country during election periods (Nnoli, 1978; Anifowose, 2006). Election periods in the country have therefore usually seen various ethnic and religious groups being driven apart, often as a result of the divisive rhetoric of the parties. This rhetoric which are usually couched in patriotic language, such as the parties posing as fighting against the marginalization of particular groups or championing (or fighting against) the emergence of one sudden messiah (or demon) in the guise of party candidates, often turns out to be smokescreens to mask the serious threat posed to the country's unity by these parties. In the run-up to the 2023 presidential elections, several commentators agreed that the country was at the cross roads.

POLITICAL PARTIES, PARTY POLITICS AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

The Fourth Republic was ushered in at a time of a crisis of national integration in Nigeria. This manifested in all manners of challenges to the nation's sovereignty. Immediately on takeoff therefore, efforts became paramount to find a solution to several manifestations of this crisis. One of the proposed solutions was the convocation of a National Conference, to discuss the multifarious challenges confronting the country. The proposal for a national conference was not a novel idea though, as the country has been known to call conferences in the past to discuss national logjams, even in the years preceding independence. At least two constitutional conferences were organized in the pre-independence years, and those organized after independence included an ad hoc constitutional conference in 1966 and a national constitutional conference in August 1995.

The Obasanjo regime in 2005 organized the National Political Reform Conference, and in 2014, the federal government under President Jonathan organized the National Conference to try to resolve unanswered national questions. The 2014 national conference under the chairmanship of Justice Idris Kutigi witnessed only four political parties namely All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), Accord Party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Labour Party, sending two delegates each, among the multiplicity of political parties in Nigeria. The major opposition party at that time, the All Progressives Congress (APC) declined attending the conference (Premium Times, 2014), questioning the sincerity of the government to organize such a conference at such an inauspicious time (The Cable, 2017). Ultimately, the conference failed to make headway in its objective as the delegates failed to take ideological positions on the national questions the conference sought to address.

The failure of the conferences to make implementable resolutions to address the national question did not however deter the political parties from continuing the quest for restructuring as a means for national integration in Nigeria. The concept of restructuring emphasizes the adoption of true federal tenets that will engender unity in diversity, enabling the component units exercise autonomy in governance, particularly in fiscal matters and resource control. The commitment of these political parties to the restructuring cause was however devoid of ideological commitment, which explains why none of the political parties (APC and PDP) has been able to carry out a restructuring of Nigeria's political system while in power. Restructuring has been canvassed also to imply power-sharing among the various segments and groups in the country. Zoning has therefore been adopted by the major political parties as panacea to the marginalization of some groups in terms of access to highest elective positions in the land.

In this regard, the Presidency was zoned to the South-West at the commencement of the Fourth Republic, apparently in compensation for the truncation of the 1993 general elections presumed to have been won by a Yoruba before it was annulled by the military junta. Subsequently, the zoning arrangement seems to have become an unwritten creed guiding political contestation at the Federal level (and in the states). Initially, there were high hopes that zoning will enhance the access of all groups to the highest offices in the land. Yet, in nearly three decades of the Fourth Republic, zoning has only succeeded in effectively rotating power between two groups in the country- the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba. The only time power went to someone outside these two majority ethnic groups in the country to a minority, it was only because providence intervened.

Following the end of President Olusegun Obasanjo's tenure in 2007, the major political parties at that time had agreed to field northern presidential candidates, ostensibly in the spirit of zoning. Eventually, the PDP candidate, Umaru Musa Yar'adua was declared winner. However, President Yar'adua died shortly after taking office. His death in 2009 tested the resolve of the political elites on the zoning arrangement, as against the expectation of northern elites that another northerner will be chosen to complete the turn of the north at the presidency, the then Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan, was chosen instead to complete the first term of the late president. The crisis of trust thrown up by this decision did not get better with the decision of President Goodluck Jonathan to stand for re-election in 2011. Although President Jonathan went on to win the election, his decision to contest for a second tenure in 2015 bred crisis particularly for the PDP.

The nomination exercise in the party to elect the presidential candidate for the 2015 election became very cantankerous. Even before the nominations, a new political party, the APC, had been formed in 2013 from a conglomeration of some existing parties and factions of other parties. Those who formed the All Progressives Congress were from different geopolitical zones as well as different ethnic and religious groups across the length and breadth of the country, and for a while, it seemed as if a truly national and broad-based political party had come on board. The somewhat mass support enjoyed by the APC presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, was in this hope. However, the campaigns for the election were very divisive, with campaign messages often hitting at the core of national integration. This anti-integrative posture did not abate even after the elections, which were won by Buhari. Almost immediately after winning the 2015 election, President Buhari started showing his hands however, and this further corroded trust and reduced national cohesion.

His penchant to fill important appointive positions in his government with northerners as well as locating important projects in the north served to challenge any integrationist claims by the government. Although the President and his party went on to

win the 2019 general elections, national cohesion seemed irretrievably damaged as whole regions and ethnic groups in the country either literally boycotted or were virtually kept out of the commanding heights of government throughout President Buhari's tenure. The campaigns in 2019 were equally divisive and the polarization of the country continued unabated afterwards. This was the setting for the 2023 general elections which were marked by so much bad blood that fears were rife that the very survival of the country was at stake. Since the end of that election, there is a consensus that at no other time since independence has the country been more divided than presently (Onyedinefu, 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

If anything, events in Nigeria since 2015 have shown that political parties and party politics have been antithetical to national integration. Political parties in Nigeria have woefully failed in their role of interest aggregation, and party politics has only served to drive the people more deeply apart than ever. To ensure that party politics in Nigeria play the role of national integration, political parties must be made to subscribe to a National Charter, which can be drawn up after a new national conference to be attended by representatives of the people. Manifestoes of political parties will be drawn from the national charter which is expected to redefine the practice of zoning and rotation in such minute details that every section and segment of the Nigerian population will be guaranteed of access to the commanding heights of power in the country. The parties and their politicians must subscribe to the tenets of free and fair elections, as well as agree to practice good governance if they win elections at any level of the federation.

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