Internal Party Democracy and Political Participation in Nigeria, 2007-2024

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Nigeria's political landscape appeared to have been marred by internal party conflicts that obviously undermine political cohesion and democratic participation. The lack of internal party democracy within political parties has resulted to poor application of democratic principles. Essentially, rule of law, participatory democracy that will open the democratic space have been relegated to the background. This paper argued that the tendency of the ruling political party or party financiers to destabilize opposition political parties narrows down the political space and deter people from actively participating in politics in Nigeria. It further noted the centrality of internal party democracy is to serve as a cornerstone for active engagement of the citizens and the furtherance of democratic consolidation. Relying on documentary method of data collection and sequential analytical technique, the paper adopted institutional theory as its theoretical guide. It concluded that poor institutionalization of political parties in Nigeria makes these political parties vulnerable to internal instability. We therefore recommended reforms and constitutional amendment to redesign party system in Nigeria so as to reduce the tendency of untoward influence to political parties while at the same time reposition political parties on the path of institutionalization.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's decades of military dictatorship and authoritarian regimes ended in 1999 with the return to democratic governance. The present fourth republic began on 29th May, 1999. With the return to civilian administration in 1999 expectation was positive. Indeed Nigerians hoped that democracy would revive development conundrums facing the nation and **reposition** the state on the path of socio-economic and political prosperity. Ironically, Nigeria's democracy has continued to flounder and presently faced with unimaginable degree of challenges (Omotola, 2009; Omotola, 2011; Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013; Nwanegbo, Odigbo & Nnorom, 2014; Odigbo, 2019; Okafor, Odigbo & Okeke, 2022; Omotola, 2021; Oyewole & Omotola, 2022).

Thus, political parties grappled to survive internal destabilization occasioned by imposition of candidates by godfathers, unbearable influences of the party financiers, planting post or place holders in a political party by external elements coupled with party indiscipline that frequently triggers internal party wrangling in political parties (Abimbola & Adesite, 2012). These acts have further diminished democratic culture among political parties and the members of their parties. In fact, since the return to civil rule in Nigeria, political parties have contributed immensely to the current challenge that appear to be threatening democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Indeed, with the increasing cultural and democratic deficit, aligning and abandoning political parties has become normal in Nigeria. This has been described by scholars as political nomadism (Udeuchele, 2015; Udeogu & Onwunabile, 2022) that have become a recurring phenomenon in the Nigerian party politics (Mbah, 2011; Abimbola & Adesite, 2012). Others tend to have described it as party defection (Nwanegbo, Odigbo & Norom, 2014; Omilusi, 2021; Oluwaseun & Adebayo, 2023; Olawale, 2024) capable of truncating democratic consolidation in Nigeria. As can be seen, the motivations driving these defections and nomadism are diverse, encompassing ideological misalignments, personal ambitions and disagreements among ruling and non-ruling class. The surge in political party defections from 2007 to 2024 raises concerns about

the potential destabilization of Nigeria's democratic system and institutions, as the loyalties of elected officials and party members become increasingly changing from time to time. Thus, the trend continued unabated with several politicians continuously shift party allegiances in such a manner that can lead to a fragmented and less effective governance system. In fact, elected officials prioritize individual interests over collective responsibilities. This poses a challenge to the delivery of public services and the fulfillment of electoral promises.

Essentially, lack of internal party democracy has severe consequences on the entire political process. It hampers public trust, increases the tendency to denigrate parties and questions both party and individual value orientation. At the same time, absence of internal party democracy discourages members of the political community intending to participate in the political process. Beyond inciting or igniting instability in a political party, lack of internal party democracy unsettles party members and sometimes induces mass exodus. Presently, almost every political party appears to be in disarray. Their inability to institutionalize, embrace conventional democratic principles and function in line with democratic norms makes internal democratic practices more combustible. This study therefore examines internal party democracy and the extent it impacted on political participation in Nigeria between 2007 and 2024.

Conceptualizing Internal Party Democracy and Political Participation

Generally, internal party democracy has remained one of the greatest challenges confronting virtually all political systems in the developing countries and more specifically, political parties in Nigeria especially since the return to democratic governance in 1999. Salih (2006) argues that internal party democracy simply means the dedication to a shared interest of every party member, collective interest of the public, and the state in its entirety. It therefore underscores the value attached to the party as an institution, how it functions or performs its responsibilities without

bias, which is essential for fostering stability, robust leadership values and democratic consolidation. It is within this context that crucial ingredients of internal political party democracy not only manifested but becomes a binding force among party faithful. In preserving this, political parties must ensure that they adhere to democratic principles such as transparency, inclusiveness, fairness, accountability and justice in the distribution of responsibilities and benefits.

Undoubtedly, Yamanga (2006) is of the opinion that internal party democracy includes the basic tenets of democracy as part or embodiment of political parties that reflect the extent these parties stick or rather adhere to major democratic principles in all its internal activities. Adherence to these values include the manner and rational behind selecting an individual or individuals for the party appointive positions, nomination of candidate for elections. Also, important is the management and discipline of members and how the party organizes her congresses. Thus, the entire gamut of the party administrative activities explains the extent apolitical party has subscribed to democratic tenets that guarantee internal party democracy. As a result, internal party democracy connotes the extent and degree of openness and inclusiveness. This is important as it explains the tendency and willingness of the political party to constructively engage virtually all party members in the process of decision-making and implementation. On the other hand, it is clear that political parties devoid of the aforementioned trait may have thrown to the bin internal party democracy. Consequently, internal instability and self-inflicted conflicts may jeopardize its capacity to win election and if already elected may experience crisis till the government crumbled.

Incidentally, some political parties in many emerging democracies lack this crucial aspects or components that put life in democracy. The experiences within these political enclaves are odious and complex thereby raises questions on the rationale behind democratic practice if parties cannot internally oversee their wellbeing. Thus, Scarrow (2005) noted that internal party democracy is all-inclusive processes that cover a variety of strategies for engagement and discussions with party members in the decision-making processes of the party. It signifies the practice of democracy within the party and the degree to which it adheres to essential democratic principles. Essentially, internal democracy pertains to the internal governance and operational practices of political parties and party systems, reflecting democratic values in aspects such as candidate and leadership selection, policy development, member relations, and considerations for gender, minorities, youth, and party funding (Ojukwu & Olaifa, 2011).

Thus, in many developing societies like Nigeria, election years witness avalanche of violence and party crisis. This can be attributed to the fact that some political parties deliberately or unconsciously design internal mechanisms of their party selection process to be inaccessible to some members of the party especially through the imposed consensus candidate. Following from this, Penning & Hazan (2001) had earlier advocated for open candidate selection process to also empower diminutive elite faction especially those that are seen as newcomers in a political party. By doing this, basic principles of democratic culture will be entrenched within the political party and the entire democratic space. Abiding by democratic rules places a political party on a good pedestrian to convince electorates and encourages political participation.

Thus, democratic consolidation in Nigeria cannot be achieved without good governance and ensuring internal party democracy. In doing this, Nigerian political parties should uphold democratic values, guarantee popular participation and respect for the rule of law. Essentially, conducting credible, free and fair elections and promoting judicial independence can potentially improve internal party democracy. Democracy is very crucial for the establishment and growth of political parties but stability and instability of political parties can make or mar democratic consolidation.

It can therefore be noted that when political parties are deeply entrenched as critical institutions of the state, democracy majorly survives. The survival of democracy also entails existence of political parties that function optimally in line with conventional

best practices by adhering to its core values, openness and the capacity to allow internal party structures to function unhindered (Ajibola & Adu, 2016). They further re-emphasized that other important elements necessary for a virile political party is ensuring accountability, high level of organizational and administrative structures, transparency, sound ideology and independence of the political parties in all their activities. Thus, the institutionalization of political parties and the degree to which they are deeply entrenched in a political system constitute the beacon of hope that democracy should sail towards consolidation.

No doubts, the more political parties are internally stable, the more democratic stability is guaranteed and democracy becomes more attractive. Ultimately, political participation increases. This is simply because democracy is all about people. It does not work in isolation. In fact, democracy's success is measured or dependent on the extent it has empowered people to surmount their basic needs and enjoy unrestrained participation in the policy process (Unah, 1993). Its relevance and meaning is dependent on how people freely participate in democracy.

In the last few decades, political participation has attracted mammoth scholarly commentary following the rapid spread of democracy (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2012; George-Genyi, 2016; Omeodu, Mgbamoka & Dasaki, 2023; Yavçan, Yılmaz & Gorgerino, 2024). Thus, democratization creates greater awareness that spurs citizens to participate in policy process and assumes ownership of government policies. As a result, Awofeso & Odeyemi (2014 as in George-Genyi, 2016) explained political participation as voluntary activity or activities commonly carried out by members of a given society by directly or indirectly relating themselves in the formation of public policies especially in selecting their leaders and policy choices. Within this context, political participation becomes the totality of actions such as voting at elections, campaigning, protesting to put pressure on leaders, contesting an election etc which individuals have voluntarily or willingly participated. In fact, George-Genyi (2016), argues that political participation must be seen as the voluntary or non-coercive involvement of citizens in the political affairs of their country. Therefore acts of coercion or subtle inducement undermine the real essence of participation and cannot ordinarily be seen as political participation.

Essentially, active political participation legitimizes the authority of the state, enhances state capacity to deal with development challenges and indeed improve the overall wellbeing of the people. Thus, Omeodu, Mgbamoka & Dasaki (2023) noted that political participation is considered as part of solution to the issue of development in every democracy. In all, political participation is all encompassing in its meaning and what it intends to achieve. For instance Conge (1988) succinctly argued that political participation can be understood as individual or collective action, at either the national or local level, that either supports or challenges state structures, authorities, and decisions related to the distribution of public goods.

Theoretical Framework

There are many theories that can explain internal political party activities and the extent political participation can help political parties stabilize and contribute meaningfully to national development. One of these theories is the institutional theory. The proponents of institutional theory include Samuel P. Huntington, Arend Lijphart, John Meyer, Brian Rowan, and Paul DiMaggio. Specifically, Huntington viewed institutionalization as the process by which organizations or institutions acquire value and stability. For him, institutions themselves are stable, providing a framework for political actions and decision making. Also, Rowan argues that institutions are crucial for understanding political behaviour, shaping outcomes and influencing social structures, emphersizing their stability, persistence, and impact on actors' actions and decisions.

While we are not unaware of the explanatory rigor and academic utility of the institutional theory especially when put into cognizance, the fact that both internal activities of political parties and political participation are all human-centred, it is our position

that the theory would not be able to unveil how participation can deepen internal workings of political parties. As a result, this study adopts civic voluntarism model. The civic voluntarism model was developed by Verba, Scholzman, & Brady (1995). Major propositions of the model are that political party is the vehicle through which political participation could be expressed. However, political engagement requires three critical elements which are;

I. That people are motivated,

II. That people are able to participate, and

III. That people are most likely to do so if they are a part of groups that request such participation.

The aforementioned three connected components are explained in the civic voluntarism model (CVM) as: resources, engagement, and recruitment. For Verba et al. (1995) resources are considered essential to possess the capacity to engage in political activities, including time, money, and civic experience. On the other hand, engagement is indispensable to political participation because it establishes an essential linkage to communities and members of their communities through political interests, partisanship and political ideology. Recruitment helps political parties to widen the coast of their membership and encourages people to engage in political activity.

The utility of civic voluntarism model (CVM) hinges on the fact that institutions are obligated to discharge certain responsibilities that foster stability and growth of the political parties. At the same time, citizens are not compelled to engage state institutions or political parties but they willingly interact and participate in the activities of political parties. The totality of these interactions adds to individual experience and majorly builds on the assumption that they are a part of groups or the political party.

However, this prevalent defections or cross carpeting raises public doubt in democratic representation and governance as these political actors seek solace from godfathers in other political parties who put them in positions of power and use them as puppets to do their biddings. This development results to lack of accountability and transparency which eventually leads to political apathy and deter political participation.

Following from the above, it is important to note that one of the major causes of lack of internal party democracy in Nigeria is the failure of political parties as institution of the state to motivate members of the party and indeed the political community. The tendency to narrow down political space, disregard active and constructive engagement, enthronement of godfatherism, the drive towards privatization of parties that hinder recruitment are all recipe for instability thereby scare people from participating in the political process.

Internal Party Squabbles and the Declining Political Participation in Nigeria

There is no gainsaying the fact that crisis within political parties in Nigeria are major obstacle to democratic growth and poor citizen's political participation in the electoral process. While we acknowledge the fact that political party as state institutions cannot exist without people hence, the possibility of crisis, the growing manifestation and devastating consequences of internal party crisis in Nigeria appear unbearable and tend to under-develop political parties. What remains to be seen is an era in Nigeria's political history where political parties will have no or less crisis.

Essentially, internal party democracy could be threatened in conditions of unhealthy relations especially among members of the party. Contestations over elective and appointive positions sometimes instigate crisis which in many cases not address properly. Lack or ineffectual institutional conflict resolution mechanisms where it exists creates avenues in which mere misunderstanding degenerate to full blow crisis and sometimes it even divide political parties. For instance, in 2014, internal wrangling in the Peoples Democratic Party led to the division of the party between the New Peoples Democratic Party and the Peoples Democratic Party. As a result, the party lost the 2015 general elections to the opposition All Progressive Congress

among other consequences. In fact, till date, the Peoples Democratic Party is yet to be revived.

Other political parties in Nigeria are also experiencing internal crisis or externally induced squabbles. The Labour Party, the newly formed coalition party in African Democratic Congress (ADC), the ALL Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) including some state chapters of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) are all battling existential threatening predicaments. For instance, the Labour Party is presently divided into several factions with one faction of the party led by Julius Abure claiming authentic leadership while the other was led by Apapa at a point. Strangely, the Abia State Labour Party convention also facilitated the emergence of another national chairman, making it three factional chairmen of on political party. Virtually, all political parties in Nigeria face this monstrous reality. Politicians do attribute their nomadic tendencies to division in the political parties and manipulations during party primaries. Thus, indirect party primaries have been a recurring factor contributing to internal party crises, which include party disputes, factionalism that weakened party cohesion, and electoral instability. A notable example is the dispute between former Vice President Atiku Abubakar and late former President Muhammadu Buhari in 2014. Atiku Abubakar, a strong aspirant for the APC presidential ticket, felt marginalized and excluded from the party's nomination process. He alleged that the party leadership was manipulating the primaries to favor late President Buhari who was preferred successor. Atiku eventually defected to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) after losing the APC ticket, citing irregularities and lack of transparency in the primary process. Another example is the 2022 APC presidential primaries, where Ahmed Bola Tinubu and Rotimi Amaechi were seen as key influencers. Some aspirants, like Ogbonnaya Onu and Audu Ogbeh, expressed dissatisfaction with the process, alleging imposition and manipulation in favor of certain candidates. This led to tensions, disputes, and eventual defections of Rotimi Amaechi to the coalition ADC.

On the other hand, prevailing party defections in Nigeria is a consequence of internal party crisis. These internal crises and instability in political parties impact negatively on political participation. For instance, the momentum the Labour party enjoyed prior to the 2023 general election seems to be evaporating tremendously as a result of internal instability that ensued in the aftermath of the election. It can therefore be noted that these crises decreased voter participation and caused electorates to have widespread indifference toward elections. Also, the manner political parties conduct primary elections tends to impact on the political process. In fact, sometimes the way the primaries were conducted affects the commitment of party members. This tendency was obvious in the 2023 general elections, as voter participation declined dramatically compared to prior elections (INEC, 2023). In fact, since the return to democracy in 1999, internal party crisis appear to have discouraged many from participating in elections. For example, the table 1 below shows that except 2003 election, all other elections in Nigeria have shown a down-ward slide on the voter turnout.

Table 1: Showing Registered Voters and Voters Turnout in Nigeria's Presidential Elections 1999-2023

Year 1999-2023	Registered Voters	Accredited Voters	Voter Turnout	Percentage of Votes Cast
1999	57, 938, 945	N/A	30, 280, 052	52 percent
2003	60, 823, 022	N/A	42, 081, 735	69 percent
2007	61,567,036	N/A	35,397,517	57.5 percent
2011	73,528,040	N/A	39,469,484	53.68 percent
2015	62,422,005	31,746,490	29,432,083	43.65 percent
2019	84,004,084	29,364,209	28,614,190	35.66 percent

| 2023 | 93,469,008 | 87,209,007 | 24,900,000 | 26.72 percent |

Source: Compiled by the authors from (Fagunwa, 2015, p. 8; Moliki & Dauda, 2014, p. 14; Okafor, Odigbo & Okeke, 2022, p87-88).

Following from the above, it can be stated that internal party crises have significant implications for Nigeria's democratic stability and party system as well as participation by the citizens. The table highlights a concerning trend in Nigerian politics, where internal party crises and incessant defections have contributed to declining voter turnout. This decline is evident in the 2023 general elections where 87,209,007 people got accredited to vote but only 24,900,000 of them actually came out to vote. This is also not to disregard the fact that in ethnically and tribally fragmented societies like Nigeria other sentiments tend to determine people's desire to participate in election or demonstrate certain degree of indifferent attitude to elections. In which ever means, what we have seen over the years is that the level of voter turnout in local elections appears higher than the general elections. Yet, there is still huge gap when put into consideration the number of registered voters who actually participated in the local elections. In all, internal party democracy is essential for democratic growth. Political participation is all encompassing but legally expressed through a political platform. Therefore, stability of political parties encourages more people to participate in the political process and vice-versa.

Conclusion

We reiterate that this study interrogated internal party democracy and the extent it impacts on political participation. The investigation is predicated on the assumptions that nation's political party system provides a robust avenue for citizens' political participation and engagement with other relevant state institutions. However, the paper noted that absence of intra-party democracy leads to defections, instability and narrows down the political space. The implication is that political recruitment and participation are inadvertently crippled. This is evidence in the continuous decline of the number of voters in Nigeria since 1999. On the strength of this, we therefore recommended Nigeria must prioritize party institutionalization, re-prioritized accountability, ensure party loyalty and democratic principles formed the basis of our political enterprise.

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