

# INTRA-PARTY FACTIONALISM AND POLICY CUM IDEOLOGICAL COHERENCE IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC PARTY

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## ABSTRACT

Intra-party factionalism has been a subject of study and discourse among scholars and policy analysts respectively. But its impact on policy and ideological coherence within the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria remains understudied. This study focuses on addressing this gap. As an implication, the study also explores how these impact on the democratic process within the party and the entire country. Being a case-study, the study is qualitative in nature and data was collected using documentary methods. The study is anchored on the Factionalism Theory and the Iron Law of Oligarchy. With these theories, the study finds that leadership struggles, personal rivalries, ethno-regional divisions, and resource distribution account for factionalism within the PDP. It also argues that the over-centralization of power by the elite in the PDP over time with less regard for the grassroots input triggered the formation of factions within the party. This eventually affected negatively intra-party ideological and policy coherence in the party leading to ineffectiveness in governance. The implication is that lack of internal party democracy as a result of elite capture of the party brings disunity and discord. Thus, political parties need to take into account the interests of all its members encouraging the institutionalization of transparent and participatory governance processes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Political parties are platforms for policy articulation cum vehicles for contesting political power within established norms and values in a democratic state. While political parties in a multi-party democracy jostle for the control of government power through elections, they often experience internal party conflicts leading to various outcomes, including internal divisions, especially among the elite and leaders of the party. Thus, intra-party factionalism has become a major feature of political parties. Amidst the intra-party contestations in established democracies like the United States and the United Kingdom, political parties have experienced internal divisions while maintaining cohesion and policy continuity (Democratic Audit UK, 2016; Lee, 2015). However, in developing democracies, like Nigeria, factionalism often undermine party coherence (Odigwe, 2025; Moliki, 2025), leading to a lot of negative outcomes among which are weak electoral performance, increased factionalism, policy inconsistency in government, loss of public trust, elite defections and party switching, internal decision-making paralysis, vulnerability to external manipulation, erosion of party discipline, decline in membership engagement (Diamond, 2015; Ibrahim & Hasan, 2020).

Africa's most populous democracy, Nigeria), offers a compelling case for examining the linkages between intra-party factionalism and policy/ideological coherence. Since the country's return to civil rule in 1999, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) has been the ruling party at the centre and in the majority of the 36 states of the country until 2015 when it was defeated at the centre by the All Progressive Congress (APC). Since then, the PDP has been experiencing intra-party factionalism that has undermined her capacity to provide coherent opposition and articulate alternative policy visions. The PDP, one of Nigeria's most influential political party, has faced recurrent internal conflicts that threaten its unity, effectiveness, and role in Nigeria politics. This has had ripple

implications for Nigeria's broader political environment, influencing electoral outcomes, governance quality, and citizen engagement.

Existing studies around intra-party factionalism and policy and ideological coherence in parties in Nigeria exist. The study by Aleyomi (2013) and Kura (2011) are empirical studies on the PDP which show that continuous factional splits within the party are often triggered by candidate imposition and opaque primaries, which often lead to litigation, defections, and unstable coalitions that eventually undermine party cohesion and programmatic follow-through. Another study by Awofeso et al. (2017) as well as Ema-Etokudo et al. (2023) are comparative and case-based study. These studies found that weak internal democracy in both PDP and APC incubates factions. The result of these is short-term bargaining over tickets rather than stable policy positions or ideological discipline. On the side of ideology and policy, scholarships demonstrate that long periods of lack of ideology and personality/patronage-driven mobilization have eventually brought about factionalism and leading to incoherent policy agendas within parties in Nigeria (Olanrewaju, 2015). Again, even when parties are less openly factional at election time, they often tend to have the same or very similar ideology or policy goals which makes it very hard to differentiate them ideologically (Husaini, 2024). At the state levels, studies show that the APC/PDP, as well as other parties reflect the same nature as the centre. Thus, factional feuds tied to selection rules and local patronage often derail party stability and policy coordination (Ogolo, 2022).

As noble as the above studies are, as they mainly focus on the different causes of intra-party factionalism, they fail to demonstrate the impacts of factionalism on policy and ideological coherence within the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria remains

understudied. The current study, therefore, delves into filling this existing gap.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND MODELLING

Factionalism theory and the Iron Law of Oligarchy have been used as theoretical frameworks for the study.

### Factionalism Theory

Factionalism Theory provides a lens through which to understand internal party divisions as a normal but potentially destabilizing feature of political organizations. Early works by Zariski (1960) and later elaborations by Boucek (2009) describe factions as semi-organized, persistent subgroups within a party, each seeking to promote its own leaders, protect specific interests, or control strategic resources. While such factions may emerge from legitimate competition and can represent pluralism within a party, they can also lead to chronic instability when the competition for dominance becomes antagonistic rather than cooperative.

The theory posits that factions tend to arise when three structural conditions coincide:

1. Leadership contestation – when internal selection processes are contested, ambiguous, or manipulated to favor certain elites, leading to rival claims to legitimacy.
2. Personal rivalries – when interpersonal conflicts among prominent political actors escalate into organized camps.
3. Socio-political cleavages – such as regional, ethnic, or religious differences that can be exploited for political advantage.

In the case of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria, Factionalism Theory explains the emergence of distinct and persistent blocs. Leadership struggles have been recurrent, with high-profile disputes such as the 2016–2017 Ali Modu Sheriff versus Ahmed Makarfi leadership tussle, which resulted from contested chairmanship claims after the Port Harcourt convention. Personal rivalries, including the Obasanjo versus Atiku conflict during the early 2000s and the more recent Wike versus Atiku tensions following the 2022 presidential primaries, have further entrenched divisions. Ethno-regional dynamics most notably the controversies surrounding the zoning arrangement for presidential tickets have repeatedly pitted Northern and Southern party elites against each other, as seen in the G-5 Governors' rebellion in 2022–2023. Resource distribution disputes, including “godfather” patronage battles in states like Anambra and Edo, have also intensified factional polarization. Factionalism Theory thus highlights that the PDP's internal disputes are not random episodes but patterned outcomes of recurring contests over leadership, identity, and resources.

### Iron Law of Oligarchy

The Iron Law of Oligarchy, first articulated by Robert Michels (1911), argues that all complex organizations, including those founded on democratic principles, inevitably evolve toward oligarchic structures. This occurs because decision-making efficiency, organizational survival, and resource management become increasingly dependent on a small leadership core. Over time, these elite develop vested interests in preserving its dominance, often at the expense of rank-and-file participation.

In the PDP, the Iron Law of Oligarchy manifests through the over-centralization of power by the party elite notably the National Working Committee (NWC), influential governors, and political “godfathers.” Since its inception in 1998, the PDP has been dominated by a small circle of decision-makers who control candidate selection, policy direction, and financial resources. This dominance has eroded internal democracy by reducing grassroots influence over critical decisions. Candidate imposition, monetized primaries, and opaque decision-making processes have alienated local stakeholders, creating fertile ground for factional breakaways.

A notable example is the 2013 defection of the “nPDP” bloc comprising seven governors and several legislators to the All

Progressives Congress (APC), triggered by grievances over central leadership's disregard for internal agreements and zoning arrangements. Similarly, the G-5 Governors' boycott of the PDP presidential campaign in 2023 reflected dissatisfaction with elite decisions that sidelined the collective preferences of subnational party structures.

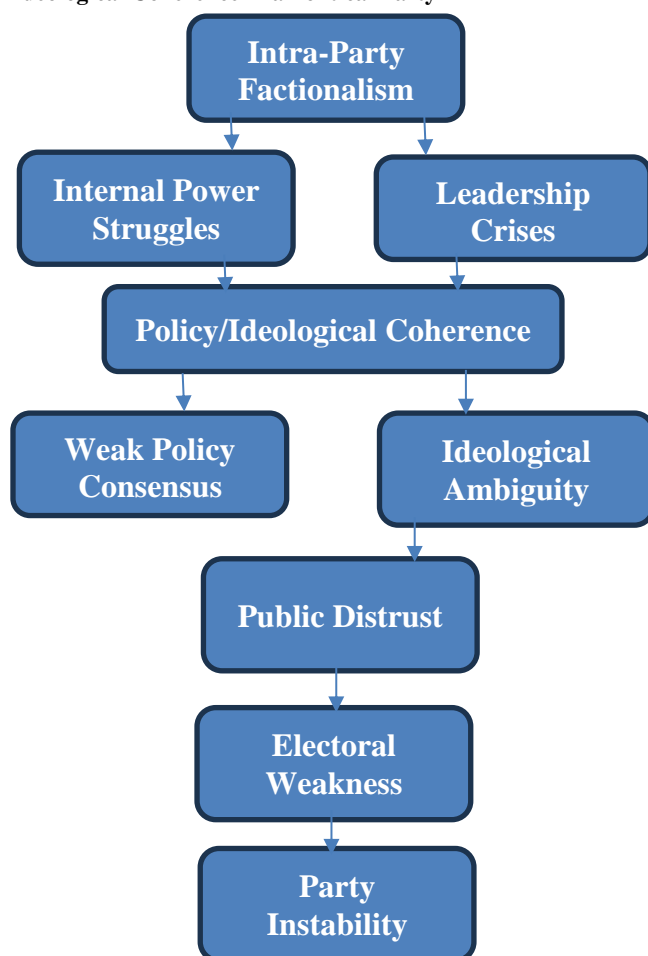
### Integrating the Two Theories in the PDP Context

When applied together, Factionalism Theory and the Iron Law of Oligarchy offer a comprehensive explanation of factionalism within the PDP. Factionalism Theory accounts for the mechanisms and triggers of subgroup formation; leadership struggles, personal rivalries, ethno-regional divisions, and resource disputes, while the Iron Law of Oligarchy explains the structural conditions that make these divisions persistent and destabilizing.

In the PDP, elite dominance and exclusionary decision-making have not only alienated grassroots members but also intensified intra-party competition, transforming it into factional warfare rather than constructive pluralism. The leadership's failure to institutionalize transparent, participatory governance has meant that grievances are resolved through power blocs and defections rather than dialogue and consensus. Consequently, the party has suffered recurring losses in ideological coherence, internal unity, and electoral competitiveness, particularly since its first loss of federal power in 2015.

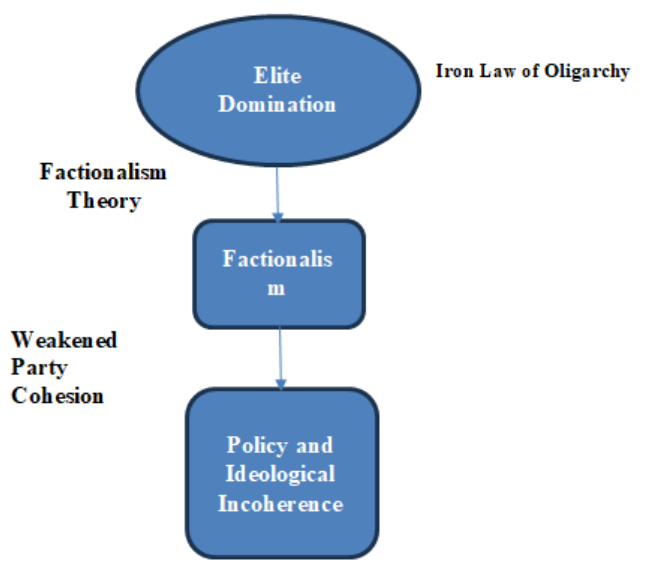
In sum, the interplay between these two theoretical frameworks underscores that the PDP's factional crises are rooted both in agency the ambitions, rivalries, and strategic calculations of its political actors and in structure the oligarchic concentration of authority that limits democratic inclusiveness. This dynamic cycle continues to shape the party's trajectory and Nigeria's broader democratic process.

**Fig. 1: A Model of Intra-Party Factionalism and Policy Cum Ideological Coherence in a Political Party**



Source: Designed by the Author (2025)

Fig 2: A model showing the Result of Elite Domination and Iron Law of Oligarchy in Practice

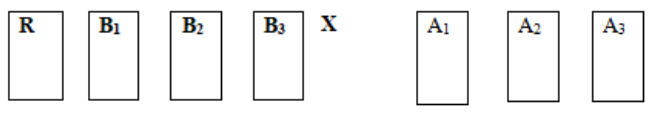


Source: Constructed by the Author (2025)

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study used the ex-post-facto research design, which is a non-experimental approach used to analyze cause-and-effect relationships based on historical data. Since intra-party conflicts within the PDP have already occurred, this design will allow the researcher to examine their impact on policy and ideological cohesion within the party without direct intervention. According to Kerlinger (1977) ex-post-facto is a research design in form of descriptive research in which an independent variable has occurred, and an investigator starts with the observation of a dependent variable. The single case design, otherwise called the ex post facto research design, is diagrammatically represented as follows:

Figure 1: single case design or the ex-post facto research design



Where:  
O = Observation  
R = Random assignment of subjects to groups and random assignment of treatment to groups  
X = Independent variable which is manipulated  
Y = Independent variable  
B = Before observation  
A = After observation  
123 = Time order of observations, before and after.

Source: Asika (1991:35)

Methods of Data Collection

The study adopted the documentary method of data collection, which enabled the researcher to extract relevant information on the subject matter. Specifically, data was sourced from official records of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on political parties, official documents from the People’s Democratic Party, judicial rulings as reported on National Dailies, and tribunal reports on intra-party disputes and electoral litigations involving the People’s Democratic Party, Nigeria’s Constitution and Electoral Act, which provide legal frameworks for party democracy. Reports from legislative committees on electoral reforms and political party regulations, books, journal articles, and

dissertations analyzing PDP’s internal crises and political party stability in Nigeria, reports from think tanks and civil society organizations (CSOs) on party democracy and governance in Nigeria. newspapers, online articles, and news archives covering PDP leadership crises, defections, and political instability, television and radio reports on PDP’s internal conflicts. The data collected were analyzed using content analysis method which involved the logical interpretation of the texts and numbers deriving meanings from them and making deductive conclusions.

INTRA-PARTY FACTIONALISM IN THE PEOPLE’S DEMOCRATIC PARTY (PDP), 2021-2023

This section of the study demonstrates that the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) witnessed a lot of intra-party factionalism between 2021 and 2024. This eventually triggered divisions and the emergence of factions within the party along different lines, which eventually affected policy and ideological consistency at both national and subnational levels in Nigeria, 2021-2023. This period was marked by significant internal discord, including the widely publicized G-5 Governors’ rebellion, parallel primaries, zoning disputes, and leadership crises.

Empirical Thematic Analysis: Linking Factionalism to Policy Fragmentation Within the PDP

The period from 2021 to 2023 witnessed increasing factional fragmentation within the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), with significant consequences for its policy and ideological coherence. Documentary evidence, particularly from the INEC’s 2023 report on party primaries and court proceedings on candidate recognition, reveals that the party operated under parallel narratives that were often contradictory and confusing to both voters and its own members. For example, the PDP National Campaign Council publicly advanced a national restructuring agenda during the 2023 campaign season, while high-profile dissenters within the G-5 bloc advocated power rotation and threatened withdrawal of support if the party leadership did not shift to the South (Premium Times, 22 October 2022; PDP NEC Minutes, December 2022).

This dual narrative is well illustrated in INEC’s documentation of campaign submissions and party correspondences, which recorded inconsistencies in zoning statements, candidate nominations, and party manifestos across regions (INEC, 2023, pp. 12–14). One electoral officer in Lagos noted in an interview that INEC received two separate PDP campaign briefs from Rivers State, each bearing the party logo but articulating divergent views on key national issues like fiscal federalism and fuel subsidy removal. Such contradictions, he explained, made it difficult for INEC to determine which communication accurately represented the party’s position. His observation aligns with reports in Vanguard (18 June 2022), which described a similar scenario in Kano, where parallel primaries and duplicated manifestos left candidates and delegates in limbo.

Court judgments further underscore the disarray. In SC/CV/162/2023, the Supreme Court reversed an earlier decision nullifying the PDP gubernatorial primary in Delta, a verdict which party members described as “arriving too late to heal campaign fractures” (Punch, 3 March 2023). This legal uncertainty not only stalled campaign efforts but also disoriented policy messaging at a critical time. A journalist from The Guardian confirmed in an interview that different PDP stakeholders in Delta State promoted competing economic plans, some reflecting national objectives and others shaped by local factional interests. The documentary trail from these campaigns, including media advertisements and NEC memos, confirms that these inconsistencies were not incidental but systemic.

Table 1: A Timeline of Major Factional Events and their Impact on Policy Consistency

| Year | Factional Event             | Description   | Policy/Ideological Fallout  |
|------|-----------------------------|---|---|
| 2021 | Suspension of Uche Secondus | Contested by court rulings; deepened North/South divide | Emergence of dual narratives on zoning, restructuring. Daily Sun (20 November 2021, p.10) |

|      |                          |   |   |
|------|--------------------------|---|---|
| 2022 | G-5 Rebellion            | Public opposition to Atiku's candidacy by 5 governors | Conflict on national unity, federalism, and rotation. Premium Times (22 October 2022); Channels TV (6 November 2022)                    |
| 2022 | Parallel Congresses      | Occurred in Rivers, Kano, Ogun; dual executive claims | Confusion in official candidacy and internal structure. INEC Report on Party Primaries (April 2023, pp. 12–14); Vanguard (18 June 2022) |
| 2023 | Ayu's Refusal to Resign  | National Chairman's defiance against zoning logic     | Weakening of party's stand on internal equity and reform The Guardian (10 January 2023); PDP NEC Minutes (December 2022)                |
| 2023 | Conflicting Court Orders | Legal disputes over primaries and leadership          | Breakdown in message discipline and public trust. Supreme Court Judgement SC/CV/162/2023; Punch (3 March 2023, p.8)                     |

**Source:** Compiled by the author (2025)

The central role of personal ambition in driving factional divides is consistently reinforced by party documents and public statements. Ayu's refusal to step down, despite documented appeals from five sitting governors and formal votes of no confidence by state chapters, revealed a breakdown in institutional enforcement of internal equity protocols (The Guardian, 10 January 2023). PDP NEC records from October to December 2022 show at least three postponed meetings intended to resolve the crisis, with notes citing "procedural disagreements" and "absence of quorum," both symptoms of the deeper paralysis caused by factional entrenchment.

A party official from Benue interviewed during the research recalled that even within the North Central zone, there was no common stance on zoning or subsidy reform, with party leaders issuing contradictory statements. His account is corroborated by Channels TV (6 November 2022), which aired simultaneous speeches by two PDP spokespeople from different regions

advocating conflicting subsidy policies, one in support of gradual removal, the other in favor of retention. This ideological fragmentation was not theoretical; it had practical consequences for the PDP's public image and strategic coherence.

Indeed, data from NOI Polls (2023) cited in Premium Times show that 61% of surveyed voters in South-South and North Central states said they "did not know PDP's clear stance" on subsidy or zoning. This finding supports the conclusion that policy incoherence was visible and damaging. INEC's post-election review (2023) concluded that the PDP suffered "internal inconsistencies that led to documentation delays and candidate substitution disputes" in at least seven states, including Rivers, Ogun, and Kano. These delays had cascading effects on public messaging, voter engagement, and electoral competitiveness.

**Table 2: Traces of Over-centralization of Power by the Elite in the PDP over time with less Regard for the Grassroots Input, Triggered the Formation of Factions within the Party.**

| Centralizing Mechanism (PDP)                                   | Grassroots Exclusion Effect                                       | Faction that Emerged / Conflict Outcome                            | Evidence  |
|--|---|--|---|
| Godfather control of tickets & appointments (e.g., Anambra)    | Members' choices overridden; coercion replaces participation      | Local PDP blocs split; open warfare and defections                 | Human Rights Watch (February 12, 2007)<br>Hoffmann (2010)   |
| Chairman selection by governors/Presidency "from above" (2016) | National stakeholders & rank-and-file bypassed                    | Sheriff vs. Makarfi parallel structures until Supreme Court ruling | Agande (2016)<br>Okakwu (2017)  |
| Leadership style seen as autocratic (2013)                     | Governors, delegates say their inputs ignored                     | nPDP formed after convention walk-out; later mass defection        | Vanguard News (March 16 (2013)<br>CKN News (October 07, 2013)                                     |
| Abandoning zoning / refusing leadership rotation (2022)        | Perceived breach of balancing norm; southern blocs feel sidelined | G-5/Integrity Group demands; soft boycott in 2023                  | Ema-Etokudo, Nweke & Onuabuchi Nwankwo (2023)<br>Majeed (2024)                                    |
| Monetized, centralized nominations                             | Ordinary aspirants priced-out; tickets brokered at the top        | Parallel primaries, litigations, state-level splits                | Adekeye and Abdulrauf (2017).<br>Ihembe and Isike (2022)<br>Sambo, Sule, Adamu, & Septiadi (2024) |

**Source:** Compiled by the Author (2025)

The table above gives empirical traces of the impact of the lack of internal party democracy and participation of the members of the party in the decision-making within the party. This led to a lot of disagreements by members of the PDP, which made them sing discordant tunes.

Thus, the documentary evidence establishes that PDP's factionalism eroded policy discipline and created parallel ideological streams within the same party structure. These show that from 2021 to 2023, the PDP functioned not as a unified ideological body but as a fragmented alliance of competing interests, each seeking to dominate the narrative in its region or sphere of influence. The analysis demonstrates that party ideology was no longer rooted in a shared vision, but in tactical claims shaped by factional survival.

## DISCUSSION

The evidence presented above demonstrates that factionalism within the People's Democratic Party (PDP) as from 2021-2023 had a profound and corrosive impact on the party's policy and

ideological consistency. This finding is most convincingly supported by a combination of internal party documents, legal records, and official reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which together reveal a party that operated under fragmented structures, conflicting narratives, and paralysed decision-making processes. The PDP's inability to maintain a unified voice on key national issues, such as zoning, restructuring, and economic policy, was not an accidental deviation but a direct consequence of entrenched internal divisions. For instance, PDP NEC minutes from December 2022 show repeated postponements of national strategy meetings due to unresolved tensions between the G5 Governors and the national leadership. These postponements were not simply administrative lapses; they symbolized a broader paralysis in the party's policymaking apparatus. At the same time, INEC's 2023 report on political party primaries (pp. 12–14) documented that in states such as Rivers, Kano, and Ogun, the PDP submitted conflicting candidate lists and divergent policy statements. This breakdown in procedural and ideological coordination reflects what Sartori (2005)



conceptualizes as a failure in party institutionalization, where personal factions replace structured ideology and rules-based governance.

Further reinforcing this picture is the Supreme Court's involvement in resolving disputes that should have been addressed through internal mechanisms. The case of SC/CV/162/2023 concerning the Delta State PDP primary is illustrative. While the Court eventually reinstated the primary's validity, the litigation process fractured the state party structure, stalled campaign activities, and contributed to ideological ambiguity on core economic and governance issues. Reports from Punch (3 March 2023) and The Guardian (10 January 2023) revealed that during the dispute, different factions within the PDP publicly presented incompatible stances on fuel subsidy reform and fiscal restructuring. This phenomenon of competing narratives within a single party platform eroded the PDP's public credibility and left voters uncertain about what the party actually stood for. This eventually culminated in the widespread losses experienced by the PDP in the 2015 and 2023 elections in Nigeria.

## Implications for Party Politics and Democracy in Nigeria

This study on the People's Democratic Party (PDP) Intra-Party factionalism and policy cum ideological coherence in Nigeria holds practical implications for various stakeholders, including political parties, policymakers, electoral bodies, and the general public. The findings offer valuable insights into the root causes of intra-party factionalism and provide recommendations for enhancing democratic stability of PDP in Nigeria.

The implications for democratic consolidation are serious. As Diamond (2022) argues, political parties serve as the essential vehicles for aggregating interests, articulating policies, and presenting voters with meaningful choices. When a party fails to offer consistent messaging and a coherent ideological agenda, it undermines the very foundation of competitive democracy. Suberu (2021) similarly emphasizes that internal party disarray weakens electoral legitimacy and contributes to voter apathy, both of which were observed in PDP's performance during the 2023 elections, especially in key battleground states where factional conflicts were most intense.

Furthermore, the PDP's crisis reflects a deeper pattern of elite dominance and personalization of party politics in Nigeria. Rather than resolving disputes through institutionalized processes, PDP leaders routinely relied on media warfare, judicial manipulation, and strategic sabotage to impose their will. Omotola (2023) rightly characterizes this as a form of institutional decay, where party politics devolves into a battlefield of conflicting egos rather than a structured mechanism for governance. The consequences for policy development are stark: strategic planning becomes inconsistent, national messaging collapses, and the party is rendered unfit to play the role of credible opposition.

Another important implication of the study for intra-party democracy is that political parties hardly survive in the absence of participatory leadership within the party. When party members feel alienated from the governance and decision-making processes within the party, they tend to fight for relevance and survival as well as for access to power within the party. This is what reflects in intra-party elite squabbles. Thus, parties enjoy more cohesion when every member sees and perceives the intra-party governance as participatory.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is obvious that intra-party factionalism within the People's Democratic Party (PDP) from 2021-2023 had a profound and corrosive impact on the party's policy and ideological consistency during the period under review. This significantly disrupted and reduced democratic participation at the base of the party's political structure during the 2021-2023 period. It also had a demonstrable and destabilizing impact on the PDP's internal unity, institutional cohesion, and functional capacity to operate as a unified political party. As one of Nigeria's major political parties, the PDP's weakening has had a ripple effect on the health of the nation's democracy. The inability of the party to reconcile its

internal differences and project a unifying vision has left a void in the opposition space, reducing the vibrancy of political competition and limiting avenues for meaningful policy debate. The study has shown that, despite factionalism within the People's Democratic Party. The party can still have the best ideology and structure in Nigeria through resolving its internal conflicts to contribute positively to Nigeria's democracy, and recommends that the party adopt inclusive strategies to prevent future conflicts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from the current study, we recommend the following:

Political Parties, such as the PDP, should institutionalize internal party democracy as a panacea to elite dominance and personalized leadership patterns within political parties, which often lead to intra-party factionalism. The legal framework for political party establishment and functioning needs to stipulate this and the institution monitoring the activities of political parties should also see to proper implementation of it.

Very much related to the above is the need for institutionalizing participatory processes within political parties in Nigeria and beyond. Such participatory processes should reflect in areas such as leadership selection, candidate nomination, budgeting and implementation, and policy formulation. This ensures a more open and accountable system within political parties and will eventually ensure legitimacy and reduce factionalism.

Lastly, political parties should be mandated to strictly follow their party constitution and rules, and violation of same and any unethical conducts such as indiscipline and sabotage should be met with stringent punishment. This step will help to ensure internal party decorum and will make political parties and their members conform to the laws regulating their activities. This in turn will ensure more democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

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