
THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN NIGERIA'S FLEDGLING DEMOCRACY

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INTRODUCTION

Despite recent progress, political parties in Nigeria remain beset by corrupt practices and do not consistently reflect the priorities of the Nigerian people. Recognizing that a strong multiparty system is essential to democratic development, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has worked in Nigeria since 1998 to strengthen democracy by supporting political parties – setting the groundwork for the country's first peaceful transfer of power from the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2015.

The political transition in 2015 increased confidence among Nigerians that credible elections are achievable and that their results would be respected. However, the flaws evident during the 2019 general elections – compounded by the increasingly diffuse nature of security challenges in the country – have stymied enthusiasm and threaten to destabilize one of the continent's leading democracies.

Nigeria's political parties could play a positive role in preserving and advancing the country's democracy; however, the rise of a strong opposition has distracted parties from achieving this aim. As the main levers of change in Nigeria, political parties must reorient their engagement to prioritize citizens and to restore the country's democratic gains ahead of the 2023 general elections.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PARTIES IN NIGERIA

Nigeria's political parties are products of the country's tumultuous political history, becoming the complex system dominated by the APC and PDP today. The oldest parties, the Nigeria National Democratic Party and the Nigerian Youth Movement, emerged from nationalist movements in colonial Nigeria and viewed participation in the colonial legislative body as a pathway to greater autonomy for the territory. However, these parties were primarily represented and populated by the elite class, focused mostly in the south.

The tripartition of Nigeria into northern, western and eastern regions under the 1945 constitution gave rise to ethno-regional-based party politics, deepening ethnic politics and exacerbating tension and conflict along tribal and regional lines. Periods of military rule that interrupted democratic governance in 1966, 1983 and 1993 further restricted the development of political parties to represent and engage citizens. While the major parties that dominate Nigeria's politics have changed, the foundations of the ethno-religious party system have remained in place.

The 1979 constitution introduced stringent measures for party formation and regulation to promote a national outlook in party activities and increased the spread of party membership across the country. The two-party system introduced in 1991 brought about public financing for parties with the aim of limiting the excessive influence of funders. A 2002 Supreme Court ruling liberalized registration of political parties, leading to a surge of new parties. The number of political parties registered in Nigeria has jumped from three in 1999 to 91 in 2019, creating immense challenges for regulation and management of party activities and processes.

Today, the dominant political parties are the PDP – which held the presidency and majority of seats in the National Assembly from its founding in 1998 until 2015 – and the APC, which formed in 2013 out of three opposition parties and won the presidency two years later with the election of current President Muhammadu Buhari.

Rather than acting as the platforms for specific ideologies or issues, today's political parties are primarily used by Nigeria's elite to gain political power and influence. Defections are commonplace, particularly ahead of elections as politicians jockey for the best platform to secure victory. This phenomenon has been particularly evident as rival APC leaders with presidential aspirations have struggled to exert control over national leadership of the party, playing out through internal skirmishes and schisms. This reality also plays out at the state level: In preparation for the Edo State gubernatorial elections (scheduled to take place in September 2020), candidate Osagie Ize-Iyamu and incumbent Godwin Obaseki swapped parties from the previous elections in 2016, reflecting the limited choice and dearth of political principle on offer to Nigerian voters.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

Political parties are critical to democratic governance, linking citizens and government and acting as a platform for citizens to influence government. Important functions of political parties in democracy include promoting the interests of their members, gaining and maintaining power within the government and proposing policy options. Political parties are most effective when

they bring together like-minded citizens with common political preferences and goals.

In colonial Nigeria, political parties provided an avenue through which to mobilize and educate citizens and grow the independence movement. After Nigeria attained independence in 1960, political parties were important channels for recruiting new leaders for the country's developing political sphere, and for allowing citizens choice and input into the selection of leaders. Political parties can also promote public accountability, collective action, popular participation, inclusiveness and legitimacy by ensuring the inclusion and consideration of citizens' principles, ideologies and goals in governance processes in Nigeria. However, parties' internal weaknesses and challenges in the political system have limited their effectiveness on these points.

The 2015 general elections provided an example of how political parties can act as a positive, constructive force in Nigeria's democracy. The APC – then in the opposition – campaigned on an issue-based platform centered on corruption, shifting the focus of the election to the concerns of the Nigerian people. The APC's electoral success demonstrated how political parties could build support by responding to the priorities of voters. Hopes were high for a new era of democracy in Nigeria, and elections have become increasingly competitive. Yet instead of capitalizing on this success and maintaining a focus on citizen concerns, political parties have concentrated their energies on exerting greater influence over the electoral process to manipulate the outcome in their favor.

REMAINING CHALLENGES FOR NIGERIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

In Nigeria, political parties tend to be organized along ethnic, religious or geographic lines rather than around ideological issues. According to a recent poll conducted by IRI's Center for Insights in Survey Research, 48 percent of people polled in Adamawa, Bauchi, Ebonyi and Sokoto States stated that they did not understand the platforms of major political parties, and 43 percent were unable to differentiate the major parties by their platforms.¹ This confusion ultimately silences marginalized populations, particularly women and youths, as it allows no room for opposing voices or diverse perspectives on ideological issues. It also means that party leaders can change a party's position on major issues without consulting membership in order to enter into alliances with stronger parties or try to gain support ahead of elections, rather than acting in the best interest of the party or out of a commitment to ideological principles.

The 2002 Supreme Court ruling that facilitated the creation of new political parties was intended to allow for a greater diversity of perspectives and voices in the political sphere. However, it has instead opened the system to abuse and manipulation. Today, politics and political parties are seen primarily as business ventures due to the influence of money.

¹ "Research from Nigeria Highlights Need for Elected Officials to Engage." *International Republican Institute*, 10 Sept. 2019, iri.org/resource/research-nigeria-highlights-need-elected-officials-engage-citizens.

Political aspirants must be sponsored by a political party to run for any office, resulting in a system in which parties sell nomination forms at exorbitant prices because candidates are forced to pay. Funding to political parties is disbursed with very little oversight, allowing members to use the funds as they please. Wealthy Nigerian political and social elites known as “godfathers” use money and influence to wield political power by sponsoring “godsons” who use their political position to advance their mentors’ interests.

While the presence of a greater number of political parties may appear to give citizens more choice at the ballot, too many political parties can overwhelm citizens and discourage voter participation. In the 2019 elections in Nigeria, 73 candidates ran for president, yet the top two contenders hailed from the main parties, the APC and PDP, and received nearly 97 percent of the vote. Ninety-one political parties ran candidates in lower level races held during the general elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has made efforts to address this in 2020 by deregistering 74 out of the 91 registered parties in the country, selecting those that had failed to win at least 25 percent of votes in a least one state in the presidential vote or in one local government area in a governorship election. Eighteen political parties enable INEC to better oversee party activities and enforce the 2010 Electoral Act. Citizens can also better decipher differences between parties and feel more confident casting their vote in the polling booth.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN POLITICAL PARTY PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA

- **Increase Accountability.** Political parties must be held accountable for their abuses of the system and failure to represent the interests of the Nigerian people. It is the responsibility of INEC to investigate crimes committed by political parties, both in and outside of electoral cycles. However, perpetrators are rarely held accountable.² This culture of impunity incentivizes political parties to continue interfering in elections and bolsters the power that parties have over the electoral process.

INEC and security forces must fulfill their mandate to punish perpetrators through increased arrests, investigations, prosecutions and suspensions. In addition, political parties must use their internal accountability mechanisms to hold members accountable for violating party constitutions, which contain prohibitions against contravening the electoral law and guidelines.

- **Close Legal Loopholes.** Political parties take advantage of weaknesses in Nigeria’s legal framework for elections. For example, the 2010 Electoral Act currently enables the substitution of primary winners with a party’s preferred candidates, and does not impose sufficient penalties for party defectors.

² In the 2019 Kogi governorship election, voting stopped mid-day in most polling units in the capital because of fearmongering and violent disruptions led by “thugs” allegedly associated with the incumbent APC governor. Yet not one person was arrested and prosecuted, and INEC still announced the results of the vote in those polling units. The same inaction occurred in the 2019 general elections and governorship elections since 2018 in Ekiti, Osun and Bayelsa.

The pending amendment to the 2010 Electoral Act – which addresses some of these loopholes – should be passed with broad political party support. The Electoral Offences Commission bill, currently pending in the National Assembly, should also be adopted to establish one independent governmental body responsible for investigations and prosecutions of electoral violations.

- **Improve Conflict Resolution.** Intra- and inter-party conflicts dominate Nigerian politics, creating an environment persistently vulnerable to violence. Parties should create standing disciplinary committees to resolve internal conflict and enforce regulations against unlawful behavior. The Inter-Party Advisory Council should also be strengthened and empowered to mediate inter-party conflicts and facilitate dialogue.

The National Peace Committee (NPC) has played an increasingly positive role in resolving inter-party conflict and strengthening elections, most notably through facilitating the 2015 Abuja Accord. Peace accords have subsequently proliferated at both state and national levels; however, the NPC does not have the legal backing to hold parties and their candidates accountable for agreement violations. The NPC should partner with INEC to sign, monitor and enforce accords between parties. The partnership should also incorporate security agencies through the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security to prosecute and sanction accord violators.

- **Re-examine Party Primaries.** Party primaries are often just as fraudulent and violent as Nigeria's general elections, yet rarely receive the same level of

attention. The problems that weaken the primary process – such as opaque candidate selection, vote buying, expensive nomination fees, disrespect for party constitutions, and the large number of petitions challenging the primary results – undermine the electoral system at large.³ In order to enhance their transparency and credibility, political parties must adopt direct voting, develop comprehensive membership databases and respect the genuine outcome of primaries. Civil society must also expand its domestic observation and campaigns against hate speech and disinformation to create the environment in which primary voters have confidence that the contest is free, fair and credible.

- **Increase Representation for Marginalized Groups.** Women and youths are underrepresented in Nigerian politics. Sixty-nine women were elected in the 2019 general elections, a meagre 4.63 percent of all elected officials in Nigeria and a decline from the 2015 elections. The 2018 “Not Too Young to Run” campaign resulted in a constitutional amendment that lowered the minimum age for elected officials. However, of the 22,823 youth candidates who competed in 2019, only 3.5 percent were elected to the House of Representatives, while only 2 percent were elected in 13 out of Nigeria's 36 State Houses of Assembly. Increased representation for women and youths will only be achieved if party primaries and congresses are democratic. As such, political parties must instate quotas for women and youths as delegates. The National Woman and Youth Leaders party also needs to begin strategically engaging constituencies and setting up funding mechanisms to implement activities that promote the

³ Petitions have resulted in the nullification of results when the courts render their verdicts after Election Day. In the case of Zamfara State, the court overturned 35 APC wins three months after the general elections because the party did not hold valid primaries. All seats were given to the first runner-up, the PDP.

constructive participation of women and youths in parties. Unless pressure is levied from within the country's most influential democratic institutions, real change will not be actualized.

- **Enhance Citizen-Responsive Governance.** Low voter turnout and disillusionment with politics and elections will continue to hamper Nigeria's democratization unless citizens see concrete responses to their votes. While some parties have set up internal think tanks to conduct research on citizen priorities and develop evidence-based policies to better respond to their constituents, they are under-resourced and mostly inactive. Parties should invest heavily in such evidence-based research and policymaking and increase direct communication with citizens about efforts to respond to their concerns and priorities.

Political parties must run issue-based campaigns devoid of hate speech or disinformation to restore their integrity in the eyes of citizens. Once elected and/or appointed to political office, party members must follow through on the promises made during the campaign period. Government officials should also invest in direct communication with constituents and respond to their concerns – for example, through the increased use of townhalls and statutory constituency-development funds. When citizens trust their government to represent and respond to their interests, Nigeria will become less susceptible to violence and participation in elections will increase.

IRI'S WORK IN NIGERIA

IRI began working in Nigeria in 1998, supporting the development of political parties and collaborating with a wide network of Nigerian and international stakeholders to improve political processes and build consensus around democratic reforms. IRI has fielded an international observation mission to Nigeria for every national election since the 1999 transition. Before the 2015 and 2019 general elections, IRI facilitated the signing of peace accords for candidates at the presidential, legislative, gubernatorial and State House of Assembly levels and organized gubernatorial debates to promote issue-based campaigning. IRI supported the formation of the APC 2013 and after-action reviews with the PDP after the 2015 elections to build consensus on accepting the outcome the vote and to develop strategies for repositioning as an opposition party.

Over the past three years, IRI has worked with Nigerian political parties in Adamawa, Bauchi, Sokoto and Ebonyi States to foster greater internal democracy, issue-based politics and inclusion of marginalized groups. IRI assisted state-level parties to replicate initiatives begun on the national level, including developing and communicating issue-based platforms and manifestoes that specifically outlined party beliefs and commitments. IRI also increased representation for marginalized groups at the state level in party leadership positions and government. Since the 2019 elections, IRI has enhanced responsive governance in all four states through technical assistance to State House of Assembly members to engage directly with citizens. This has enabled members to respond to their concerns through the increased use of constituency-development funds and the enactment of legal reforms that address service-delivery gaps. In 2020, 10 bills were introduced in the target State Houses of Assembly – two of which have been signed by governors – that respond to priorities raised by citizens during IRI-supported constituency townhalls.

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