



Political Parties, Civil Society Organisations and Democratic Process in Nigeria

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Abstract

Central to the discussion in this paper is the nexus between political parties, civil society organisations in sharpening democratic process in Nigeria. Political parties and civil society organisations plays a key role in the democratic process. An effective and sound democracy is possible when there is proper mediation between political parties, civil society organisations and the state. Although, the interaction between parties and the civil society was initially distant, some levels of alliance are beginning to development with recent happenings in the Nigeria polity. There are certain issues that the paper addresses to political parties that have emerged which cannot be ignored in fostering close linkages between political parties on the one hand, and civil society and constituents on the other in the search for a viable party system for sustainable democratic process in Nigeria. Firstly, is the imperative of parties strengthening links with constituents through effective partnerships with credible civil society organisations in order to promote issue-based campaigns and mobilization. Secondly, political parties stand to gain in deepening their platform content by involving civil society organisations in the development of their agenda and in the refining of the content of their policy and legislative proposals. Thirdly, is the collaboration advocate between parties and civil society organisations such that credible civil society organisations leaders are offered the platform through which they can be recruited into public office.

Keywords: Political party, Civil society organisation, Democracy, Nigeria

Introduction

It is adjudged that one of the elements of a democratic process is the mediation of interest between the state and the citizens. Mediation is a process wherein the parties connect to different segments of the society to the state and the political – electoral sphere, ensuring that the citizens have comparatively equal opportunity to the state. In democratic settings, the citizens of a country ensure that

they organize themselves in order to express, protect, defend and direct the aims and objectives in a policy-making and articulation.

Political parties are key institutions in the process of any democracy. They are main vehicles of organizing political representation, political competition, and democratic accountability. They engage in the political recruitment process, organize electoral

structure, link the state and the civil society organisations, articulate public policy, influence the executive and facilitate coalitions. Political parties aggregate and articulate diverse interests, recruit and present political candidates for political offices, and ensure that it develop competing choice making (Downs, 1957; O'Donnell, 1994 & 1996; Linz and Stepan; 1996; Keefer, 2005). Political parties are critical institutions of democratic governance, and indeed, important pillars of democracy (Simbine, 2002; Okoosi-Simbine, 2006). If elections express the sovereign will, political parties provide the platform for articulating that will and selecting the personnel who must embody it in government. Therefore, the claim to govern by a political party is anchored on its ability to get the support of a majority of voters in free and fair elections.

However, there differing views to how political parties align themselves with the voters. While some assume that this process is largely driven by the voters themselves with the “rational” political party simply aligning itself with the preferences of majority of voters (Downs, 1957). Others see the political party as the creator of the vision behind which mobilizes the voters. The first view suggests that political parties are pragmatic entities whose overriding need for power compels them to adopt electoral platforms that reflect the positions of most voters. In this, the populist conception of democracy, elections express a relationship between the voter and the elected official with the former controlling the later (Ware, 1979). On the other hand, the conception parties as essentially instruments through which like-minded people organize to enthrone their

interests as the basis of government action (Duverger, 1959).

In Nigeria, the political parties are not closely connected with the people, while the civil society organisations (CSOs) always play a leading role in terms of interest mediation. The intention is to ensure that they play an intermediary role amongst the political parties and sometime undo parties with regards to interest mediation. The civil society groups in Nigeria over the year's process this follows the failure of parties to reach out to various sentiment of the society. In developed nations with a robust democracy and party system, scholars and political analysts have observed a tremendous shortfall in the capacity of political parties to mediate interests.

William Crotty describes the condition of political parties in the United States of America thus:

We are witnessing a decline in the role and significance of political parties in the United States. The reasons for this decline are many: society is changing; a new technology of politics has arisen; an evolving electorate is placing new and unaccustomed demands on the party agencies (cited in Strom & Svasand, 1996).

Other reasons proffered for the shrinking role of political parties in contemporary democracies include electoral dealignment and the rise of non-traditional interest groups, social movements and other forms of modern social networks (Whiteley, 2010, Coleman, 1996). The perception of civil society literature, the notion of “gap filling” where political parties failed, the civil society

organisations endeavour at all cost to bridge the gap by providing alternative means of political participation. In most nations of the world, civil society organisations play a role of “replacement” by highlighting their features alongside political parties; they averred that they are newer, more participatory, more programmatic, and less corrupt organisations (Nwachukwu, 2014). However, it is important to note that while civil society organisations possess the capacity to widen representation and deepen democracy; political parties still occupy a central position in the democratic process.

Theoretically, political parties can articulate, aggregate, negotiate and represent interest in a way that civil society organisations cannot. The representation carried out by civil society organisations differs almost completely from political parties. It should be noted that civil society organisations do not formally participate in the electoral system and therefore cannot transform their aspirations in to policy and programme which means that civil society organisations lack consolidated history where the citizens can authorize representation and ensure accountability and responsiveness. The paper discuss around political parties, civil organisations and democratic process in Nigeria drawing tentatively on the mutual interaction between them. Looking at the nexus of political party, civil society as it relates to Nigeria, the roles, factors that have shaped the relationship.

Objective of the Study

The primary goal of this study is to determine whether political parties and civil

society organisations play a significant role in the democratic process in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study employed documentary research. The paper relied solely on secondary sources of data which were then analyzed using content analysis. The secondary source of data was generated from published, unpublished materials including the internet.

Conceptual Clarification

Political Party

Political parties are a major features of democracy. Joseph and Myron (1966) identified three theories of political parties: institutional, historical-situation and developmental. For proponents of the institutional theory, political parties originated with the rise of parliament which necessitated elections especially with expanded suffrage. In such instances, parties could be internally established through efforts of groups or legislators who needed the support of the masses to remain in parliament such as the Conservative and Liberal Parties in Great Britain and Canada, Democratic and Republican Parties in the United States of America, National Liberal and Progressive Parties in Bismarckian Germany, Liberal and Progressive Parties in the Post-Tokugwa Japan as well as Liberal Party in 19th century Italy. Others can be externally created through social movements or the quest to change ruling group or through ‘demand for representation’ such as Christian or Christian Democratic Parties that were created in the 20th century, British Labour Party, Socialist Parties.

Externally created political parties tended to be more centralized, ideological, disciplined, less dependent on parliament than internally created parties. Proponent of the historical situation theory argues that political parties emerged as a result of the consequences of crises and the need to resolve or manage conflicts. They maintained that salient features and occurrences in societies “history tend to shape the nature of emergent of political parties”. These situations include threat to legitimacy, integration and participation in a society such as “war, inflation, depression, mass population movements, demographic explosion or less dramatic changes in education system, occupational patterns, agricultural or industrial development or the development of mass media.

The developmental theorists contend that political parties emerged as a means to modernize societies. In other words, with the advancement of society and appearance of new social groups, particularly the expansion of the entrepreneurial class and proliferation of specialized professionals, political parties were created.

Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006) observed that political parties provide platform for articulating and channeling of policies and programmes of government. It seeks to capture political power but they do this by seeking popular support through elections. By contesting and winning elections, political parties become the effective agents for choosing those who exercise governmental power.

Interestingly, the claim to govern by a political party is anchored on its ability to get the support of a majority of voters in a free and fair election. However, there are differing perspective to how political parties align themselves, but however it is political parties are main to play an integrative and adaptative role in a society. This makes them vital intermediaries between society and politics (Bogaards, 2010). Most political parties can do this task by translating socio-cultural divisions, aggregate them or block them.

Civil Society Organisations

Arguably, civil organisations are largely seen as a collection of groups or associations that are owned or control by governmental actors and they do not have interest of profit making but basically what will benefit their members and others in their society with good reference to cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic consideration. These non-profit organisations are indeed independent of any institution of government. They are self-sufficient, voluntary, state-free in their dealings. For instance, non-governmental organisations, think tanks, universities, independent media, social and religious organisations, fall under what is termed civil society organisation. In most cases, individuals that find themselves in these groups enjoy some autonomy and protection from hegemonic and autocratic related activities.

Kukah (2002) maintained that the “civil society” refers to non-profit and individual self-help groups, institutions, and agencies that have been recognized as key tools for

advancing democracy, good governance, civil rights and democratization. Robinson (2002) views civil society as part of an “extended state” by which the ruling class (or the state) is able to maintain hegemony over its citizens.

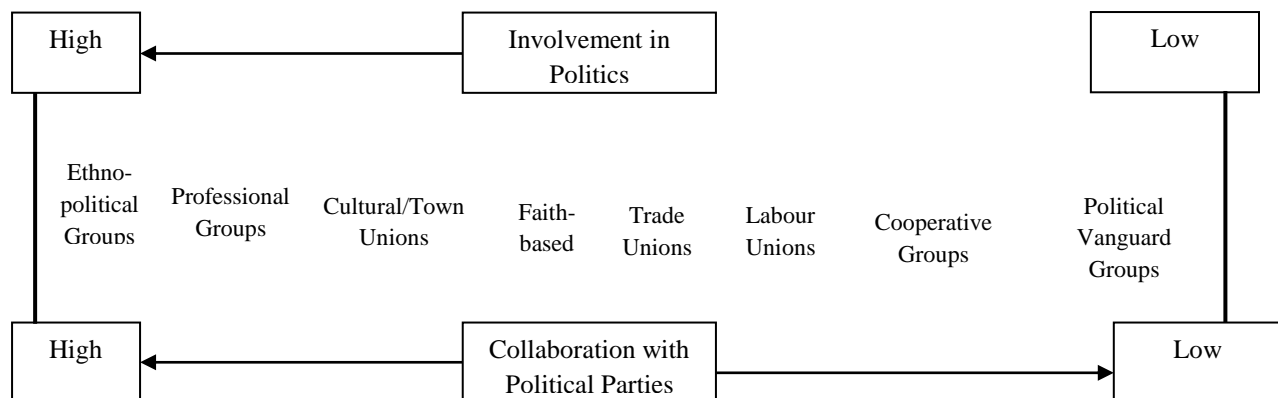
Gawenta (2004) synthesizes these three competing ideas noting that civil society organisations (CSOs) provide a voice for citizens to communicate with government by deliver services to citizens and hold government officials accountable through watchdog efforts.

The Nexus between Parties and Civil Society

Since Nigeria turned to democracy in 1999, only small degree of collaboration has occurred between political parties and civil society organisations. To a very large extent, most civil society organisations keep a

distance from political parties and partisan politics. Organisations and institutions that are most active in politics are the ones that also have the closest collaboration with political parties. The diagram below indicates the nexus and degree of engagement of the civil society organisations in partisan politics as well as their level of collaboration with political parties. Within the span of 1999 – 2023, most civil society organisations sprang up in different parts of the country to have a robust engagement with political parties. Some of these groups are: professional bodies, cultural/town unions, faith-based organisations, right-based groups, labour unions, trade-unions, ethno-political group, cooperative organisations amongst others. These groups have succeeded in forming a strong and closed alliance with political parties for a fruitful democracy and an effective governance.

Table 1: Nexus between Civil Society Groups and Political Parties



Adapted from Ibeanu, 2007, p. 30.

Almost all the groups mentioned above, the political vanguard group seek outrightly the electoral success of a particular political party/politician but to a very large extent, ethno-political group often widen their focus by ensuring that their interests are accommodated in the different political parties. Those groups in the mainstream of ethno-political groups are the Arewa Consultative Forum in the North, Ohanaeze Ndi-Igbo in the Southeast and the Afenifere in the Southwest (Irukwu, 2007). The O'odua Peoples' Congress in the South-West do not received any much attention politically because of its alleged sponsored of militias within the western region. These groups serve as smooth platforms for political parties and politicians to mobilize different ethnic groups to get their support.

Fundamentally, since independence, the trend of party-civil society relationship in Nigeria has changed. The existed alliance between political parties and ethno-cultural associations particularly in the First Republic has been replaced by distance. The emphasis on ethnic identity differences among Nigerians during the 1940s and 50s enhanced the growth of cultural-nationalism among the country's three major ethnic groups. This reflected in the establishment of pan-ethnic socio-cultural associations such as the Igbo State Union and the Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Coleman, 1958). Although, the original objectives of these organisations became closely associated with factions within the nationalist movement, and later the political parties. Most importantly, the First Republic parties got their roots from ethno-communal associations which emerged in the late 1940s and 50s. But they succeeded in awakening the activities of the

civil society organisations in the country (Coleman, 1958; Ihonvbere & Shaw, 1998). Nnoli (1978) observed that ethno-political groups provide rich grounds for sectional political mobilization and competition in the early years of Nigeria's political development. Their activities were heightened by the apparent inadequacy of social amenities and employment. Within that period, these groups serves as an impetus through which various ethnic groups sensitize and mobilized their members address socio-economic challenges confronting their region.

The major dominant political parties in Nigeria answering their names based on their region and form close alliance with ethno-communal associations. For instance, the Action Group (AG) is popular known across the western region because of its roles in spearheading sectional political mobilization. Most importantly, the party is largely seen as a political protrusion of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Descendants of Oduduwa), a pan-Yoruba cultural association that was inaugurated in 1948 (Nnoli, 1978; Anifowose, 1982 cited in Nkwachukwu, 2022). Because of the nature of activities carried out by Action Group (AG), it failed the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) which started as a nationalist party to seek ethno-regional support to enable it gained ground. In early 1950s, the NCNC moved more closely to the Eastern Region particularly to the Igbo area – the hometown of its support was greatly achieved. The party has a ties with the Igbo State Union and use the union to mobilize support from the Igbo land. They work tirelessly to identify the NCNC and its leader Nnamdi Azikiwe to ensure that development comes to the land.

Most importantly, the ethno-regionalist orientation of the two dominant parties in the South-west (AG) and South-east (NCNC) stimulate the Northern literate to form a Northern Party in 1949 called Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) which was inaugurated in Kano in 1949 (Olusanya, 1967, Dudley, 1968). The NPC operated like a Northern Cultural Organization than a mere political party. The party tied down its activities and membership to the north with its goals and objectives to the development of the north only.

Arguably, successive governments because of the negative effects of "ethnonization" of party politics have made concerted efforts aimed at discouraging the involvement of ethno-cultural organisations into policies. This effort was seen in the regulatory framework adopted for party registration in the Second Republic 1979 and modified since then (Diamond, 1982). The regulatory framework ensure that political parties are very open to everyone to register with putting one's region, culture, religion, sex, tribe among others into consideration. No any single emblem should carry any ethnic coloration. Therefore, all parties most endeavour to distance themselves from ethno-cultural groups to present themselves as national parties weaving a national face.

With the fallout of the First Republic and the long military interregnum, civil society organisations have transformed its relationship with the state. During this period, the civil society was dominated by pro-democracy and human rights groups which took over from ethno-cultural groups as the main actors in the civil society. Democracy and right activists formed various national platforms which brought

together professional groups, youth and women associations as well labour unions. Among such platforms was the campaign for democracy (CD), national platform that was at the forefront of the struggle to end military interregnum in the country (Enemo & Momh, 1999).

Again, the state civil-service society relationship had a speedy changed following Nigeria's transition to democratic rule in 1999. But within the span of 1980s and 1990s, the struggle of the civil society was a bit redundant. Matters were made worse by the shift of donor support from human rights activism to strengthen state institutions and programmes. Many civil society organisations hitherto kept a distance from the state or which confronted the state were forced to engage with the democratic state. Therefore, civil society organisation groups shifted their focus to "democratizing the civilian regime". Ya'u (2010) maintained that, the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR) claimed regime is the idea that the basis for Nigeria's transition in 1999 was not "democratic rule" but 'civilian rule'. The groups insisted that the evolution of a truly democratic Nigeria requires the dismantling of the legacy of militarized institutions and attitudes through long term democratic reforms. These reforms should begin by the convening of a "Sovereign National Conference (SNC) to engage stakeholders on the political future of the country and to ensure that people driven constitution is produced.

The Sovereign National Conference find it very difficult to realized the nurture idea, the pro-democracy groups quickly shifted the their emphasis to the 1999 Constitution and started canvassing for the

review of the constitution. Their position and perception has been the fact that the 1999 Constitution is the major setback to Nigeria development because of the inherent inadequacies in the constitution since it is designed by the military with the contribution of the people. Therefore, the intension of the group is to have a people oriented constitution.

Fundamentally, as the argument and counter-arguments over constitutional reform was still ongoing, Nigeria conducted two general elections 1999 elections. Serious issues emanated from the 2003 election that it was full of flawed. Same thing was also said with regards to the 2007 as it received a with spread of condemnation from stakeholders. Even President Umar Yar'Adua who to a very large extent is the major benefitting state it categorically that the 2007 elections that brought him to power was full of flawed. These gave further strength to the pro-democracy groups to quickly reiterate that the flawed emanated from the constitution and therefore to address the issues, the need to review the constitution is eminent. The efforts by these groups resulted to the formation of Electoral Reform Network (ERN) which played a major role in producing a civil society version of the Electoral Bill in 2001 and 2006. With the interest of the President (Umar Yar'Adua) to change the narrative towards electoral reform after 2007 election, civil society organisations such as CFCR and ERN indeed played a central role in the Electoral Reform Committee that was set up by the President.

According to Ya'u (2010, p. 26), he observed that:

in the context of the changing role of the civil society in Nigerian politics since 1999, the relationship between political parties and the civil society has witnessed tremendous transformations. At first, party-civil society relations were marked by avoidance and distance. On one hand, the parties that emerged in 1999 did not make sufficient effort to woo civil society organisations, while on the other hand, civil society organisations at that time tended to avoid engagement with political parties. However, civil society organisations and activists later took a major step towards collaborating with political parties. In the first place, many civil society activists argued that democratic struggles in Nigeria may not produce any substantial outcome if the civil society maintains a non-partisan stance. To this end, some pro-democracy activists adopted an "entrust strategy" joining the leading parties in their home states in order to vie for political positions and/or gain opportunities which could be used to democratized the polity from inside.

The involvement of some of these activists in partisan politics brought in firstly. Uche Onyegocha and Abdul Oroh, these two are members of the Civil Liberty Organisations (CLO) who all won to the House of Representatives. Much later, prominent activists, Adams Oshiomhole, former President of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Kayode-Fayemi former executive Director of Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) who became the Governor of Edo and Ekiti States respectively a serious legal tussles. The involvement of the civil society activists in politics created a major breakthrough in terms of relationship of distance, and a

significance step towards parties and civil society collaboration.

Apart from placing activist in political positions, civil society organisations and political parties have succeeded in an effective collaboration to opposed government policies and programmes at all levels. They entered into a strong alliance to oppose attempts by the former President Obasanjo to truncate and amend the constitution and grant the president a third term in the office. All the efforts put by the Deputy Senate President Chief Nasiru Ibrahim Mantu who was at the forefront of the third term agenda of Obasanjo was put to rest by the collaboration of the civil society activists and the political parties before 2007. Lastly, there was a moment when civil society organisations collaborated with the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) to initiate and implement government policies that was the Bill on Public Procurement and the Bill on Nigeria Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (NEITI).

Role of Civil Society Organisations in Party Politics

The civil society organisations in Nigeria have played a very key roles in the democratic process that led to the entrenchment different democratic regime. Many of these groups like Campaign for Democracy (CD), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Committee for Defense of Human Rights (CDHR), Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) and National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) became very instrumental in the restoration of democracy in Nigeria. The activities of these groups and other students and labour

unions led to the demised of military interacnum. NADECO remained at the forefront and very vocal in criticizing military regime of General Sani Abacha. It succeeded in joining other key civil society groups to establish the United Democratic Front of Nigeria (UDFN).

The engagement and re-engagement of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) by the civil society organisations and other stakeholders for re-engineering of the electoral process has continued to strengthen the system. Indeed, the civil society organisations facilitated greater understanding through establishing an interface between INEC and other stakeholders like the media, political parties and civil societies and between INEC and coalition of civil society organisations. In real sense, the civil society organisations have engaged INEC at the INEC Roundtable on "Preparations Towards the 2023 General Elections to enhance Citizens Participation through Civil Society Organisations" which was held in different States of the Federation. These engagements with INEC indeed further added more strength to civil society organisations voter education activities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the nexus between political parties, civil society organisations and democratic movement in Nigeria. There is no doubt that the civil society organisations (CSOs) are indispensable factor in the activities of political parties and democratic movement. The CSOs have indeed made government to be accountable in their dealings to conform

with the acceptable standard globally. But certainly, it is very difficult to achieve that with concerted efforts from the leadership of the ruling class or the government. The failure of a genuine leadership in a country like Nigeria has surfaced itself through the act of corruption, impunity, lack of accountability particularly amongst the ruling class on areas of truncating and tempering with electoral procedures, subverting legal framework and procedures for their selfish interest. These activities have succeeded in causing the country into a very dangerous and precarious situation. The intention between parties and the civil society was initially distant but some levels of alliance were beginning to develop which led to the emergence of some civil activists to leadership positions.

The most known example of party civil society interaction and collaboration is the one between parties on the one hand and political vanguard groups and ethno-cultural groups on the other hand. This relationship is however limited by the fact that like many other civil society organisations, ethno-cultural groups shy away from identifying with a particular political party making it difficult to clearly identify their position on political issues. This situation has given rise to politicians to use these organisations as platform to express their ethnic chauvinism since the organisations do not have clearly identifiable policy directions. Most importantly, political parties and civil society groups have some skills and capacities that can be harnessed to enhance their role in Nigeria's democratic movement to strengthen their relationship. The recommendations for this study are:

- i. The cordiality between the civil society organisations and political

parties should be strengthened to increase their advocacy on grassroots mobilization. Desk offices should be created at every ward levels so that the presence of the civil society organisations should be felt like the political parties.

- ii. Civil society organisations must guard against factors that hindered their effectiveness in terms of implementing their task of ensuring accountability, transparency and good governance at all facet of government.
- iii. The need for rigorous training of civil society organisations to be in tandem with the new development of e-electoral means of voting procedure remained very crucial. Since the nature of voting within the Nigerian political space is increasingly changing as it follows the path of developed nations.

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