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The Political Elite and the Crises of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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Abstract

The political elite in every society plays leading and indispensable role in democratic consolidation. Given their strategic position in the scheme of things it would not have been otherwise. This is typified and symbolized by Michel's 'iron law of oligarchy'. This law synthesizes the notion of elite inevitability in controlling the levers of State power and governing society. Democratic consolidation is the process of embedding or institutionalizing democracy in any political system. However, democracy in Nigeria is facing crises of consolidation and the political elite are at the centre of the crises. Thus, this paper problematizes the role of the political elite in Nigeria's democratization and argues that the character of the political elite is responsible for the crises of democratic consolidation in the country. It argues among others that the parasitic, selfish and opportunistic tendencies of the political elite have serious negative implications on democratic consolidation. Their penchant to ignore and suppress fundamental/core democratic values and institutions especially in the country's electoral process has not only promoted incessant and perpetual intra-party crises but also vitiated opposition political parties. The reduction of the electoral process to means of capturing and privatizing State power through the imposition of candidates of political parties that promotes a patronage system has undermined the participation of majority of the people in the process. The paper concludes that until and unless the problems and/or characteristics of the political elite are concretely and adequately addressed, democracy and indeed democratic consolidation in Nigeria will remain crises-ridden and embattled. It recommends the transformation of the Nigerian State through constitutional reforms, economic empowerment of ordinary Nigerians, and the implementation of electoral reforms to ensure financial and administrative autonomy of INEC and internal democracy in the political parties as key solutions to the problems. The paper adopted the secondary method of data collection and the analysis is purely qualitative and descriptive.

Key Words: Political elite, democratic consolidation, political parties, election, oligarchy.

Introduction

The political elite in every society plays leading and indispensable role in democratic consolidation. Given their strategic position in the scheme of things it would not have been otherwise. Democratic consolidation is the process of embedding or institutionalizing democracy in any political system especially in the contemporary era where democracy is regarded as the 'only game in town' (Haynes, 2012; Linz and Stepan, 1996). From the mid-1970s to date, there was unexpected, not regionally specific, shift from unelected to elected governments- a process of democratization, and Huntington (1991) a US political scientist, was quick to identify the phenomenon and decided to give it a name: the "third wave of democracy" (Haynes, 2012, p.1). In history, the third wave of democracy, "is the most recent example of a long-term, historical trend towards more democratically viable regimes and away from authoritarian systems and leaders" (Croissant and Haynes, 2014, p. ix). This happened together with the end of the Cold War (Fukuyama, 1993, 2020; Galston, 2018). For as aptly noted by Plattner (2019):

The demise of European communism accelerated a growing global consensus that constitutionalism, the rule of law, the protection of individual and minority rights and even

market economies were universally desirable even if they were not easily achievable in countries with long histories of authoritarian rule (p. 8).

In the context of Nigeria this is more or less a resurgence of democratization after several failed attempts in the past to institutionalize democracy during the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Republics. In the last 25 years Nigeria like most countries in the developing world has been going through the democratization process under the 4th Republic and, without doubt the process is crisis-ridden- it is at a boiling or breaking point. Consequently, it is observed that democratization in Nigeria is 'slumping' (Diamond, 2020) and 'embattled" (Plattner, 2020). Beginning from May 29 1999 when the military officially relinquished political power to the civilian wing of the elite (political elite), the country is tortuously marching towards democratic consolidation or maturity. This march has left in its trail doubts and challenges which are unmistakably and eloquently encapsulated in the widespread disappointment and disenchantment among majority of Nigerians. This stems mainly from both the defective electoral process where votes do not count and the will of the people subverted, as well as the lack of improvement in the material or welfare conditions of ordinary Nigerians. Indeed, as Ake (1994, 1996) aptly stated in a wider African context that the democratization taking place is not in the least emancipatory, thereby, resulting in the disempowerment of ordinary people. Beyond that, the process has been reduced simply to multi-party elections among the political elite and so the people only vote without necessarily choosing their leaders (Ake, 1994, 1996; Fawole, 2005). Ibrahim (2009) argues that elections in Nigeria seem to have been turned by the political elites who control the state into "occasions for the subversion of the democratic process" and the consolidation of their narrow interests. For as Obi (2008, p. 30) usefully puts it, the present forms of democracy being promoted, as part of a global project, while providing a legitimizing pretext for Nigeria's political elites to capture and retain power, disempowers the majority of the people.

Overall, democratization in Nigeria is facing crises of consolidation and the political elite are at the centre of the crises. As rightly alluded to "the study of political elites and leadership is very important for understanding the trajectories of development in any society" (Albert, 2005, p. 79). Thus, this paper problematizes the role of the political elite in Nigeria's democratization and argues that the character of the political elite is responsible for the crises of democratic consolidation. The lawless, parasitic and opportunistic nature of the political elite among others is accountable for the crisis. To justify this, the paper is structured as follows: introduction which outlines the issues, statement of problem and objective; conceptual clarification of political elite and democratic consolidation; an analysis of the peculiar characteristics of Nigerian political elite and their implications on democratic consolidation; conclusion; and recommendations. This is basically a documentary paper. In other words, the paper adopts the secondary method of data collection and the analysis is purely qualitative and descriptive.

Conceptual Clarification

The paper clarifies albeit in brief the two main variables namely: political elite and democratic consolidation.

(a) The Political Elite

The concept of 'elite' is based on the notion that every society holds a ruling minority, a group that controls and disputes the most important power sources (Lopez, 2013, p. 1). Elite

theory is deep-seated in classical sociology especially that of Weber (2005, 1922) and Michel (1911) {see Lopez, 2013}. These authors are labelled 'classical elitists'. Classical elitists hold the view that democracy as government of the people or 'demos' is necessarily elite-driven. Meaning that the majority is necessarily ruled by a minority (Lopez, 2013, p. 1-2). This is typified and symbolized by Michel's 'iron law of oligarchy'. This law synthesizes the notion of elite inevitability, formulating it as a natural law (Lopez, 2013). In other words, it is only natural that a few or a minority will rule the majority or masses. This class of individuals or minority of the people tend to influence and take major decisions of society, they have power and they dominate society. Mosca (1970) a notable political elite theorist provides lucid insights on the political elites or 'ruling class' when he avers:

Among the constant facts and tendencies that are to be found in all political organisms, one is so obvious that it is apparent to the most casual eye. In all societies- from societies that are very meagrely developed and have barely attained the dawnings of civilization, down to the most advanced and powerful societies- two classes of people appear- a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent (p. 252).

He further states as if to reaffirm that "whichever it may be, the management of public affairs is in the hands of a minority of influential persons, to which management, willingly or unwillingly, the majority defer" (p. 252). Just to restate, one of the theoretical/classical foundations in our view of political elite can be found in Robert Michel's classic work of political sociology, "Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy, 1911". Michel's main argument, known as the "Iron law of oligarchy" holds that modern mass democracy is a smokescreen for oligarchy (or, as aristocracy). The path toward oligarchization as described by Michel is something that no modern democracy can avoid, regardless of its leaders' personal attitudes towards core democratic principles. In modern societies, democracy is doomed to become oligarchy (Nodia, 2020, pp.75-76).

Nodia (2020, 76) provides two reasons for this namely: the very nature of the people- especially their lack of knowledge and judgment necessary to make good political decisions. People who have the competence and skills of national leadership are few and far between, and the masses are predisposed to accept the leadership of that few; the nature of organization- the masses cannot effectively function as a single body. They cannot quickly make or carry out decisions. Therefore, the masses have to delegate these crucial functions to the political elite and to trust that they will act in their best interest. Overtime, the political elite tend to naturally keep and maintain their power positions. The political elite are inclined to determine almost everything and only provide very limited menu of options for the masses to vote or decide. Recall that Dahl (2000, pp.37-38), one of the most celebrated scholars on liberal democracy, identifies five criteria which a society would have to meet to be called a democracy namely: effective participation, equality in voting, gaining enlightened understanding, exercising final control over agenda, and inclusion of adults. This presupposes that a society without these criteria especially effective participation, gaining enlightened understanding, and exercising final

control over agenda cannot claim to be a democracy. This simply reinforces Michel's iron law of oligarchy.

Furthermore, political elite probably constitute the most researched elite sector, and often in the literature we find the term 'elite' being used as a synonym for 'political elite' (Lopez, 2013, p. 3). The political elite is understood as the echelon of the political power structure where major and critical policy decisions are taken and where control lies over the treasury and key institutions of government (Kifordu, 2011, p. 17). From the pluralist (liberalist) perspective, the political elite is fragmented and dispersed over various groups formed on the basis of cross-cutting differences of interest in society. This concept of political elite gives the impression that in terms of power and its usage, the class is divided along several lines- ideological, political, economic, regional, and religious. However, this paper contends that in relation to Nigeria the political elite may be drawn from varying political parties, religious organizations, regional groups etc but is unified in terms of ideology and the purpose for which State power is used. State power for the Nigerian political elite is used for self-aggrandizement and primitive accumulation. Once State power is captured by the political elite, as it has, it is used to advance the narrow interests of its controllers. As a result, popular interests suffer, rights are abridged, and pro-people issues are suppressed and neglected (Ihonvbere, 2002; Amuwo, 2008; Animashaun, 2009). Suffice it to say that state power appears to be exercised for the sake of power and not for the benefit of the people (Obianyo, 2008; Olaitan, 2006). It is observed that the political elite operate the Nigerian state in a way that "There is hardly any rule of law, no plausible system of justice, no transparency. The coercive instruments of the state are above the law, civil society is below it, ordinary people are out of sight far beyond its protection" (Ake, 1996, p. 6). This will be consolidated later. For now let us turn to the concept of democratic consolidation.

Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation is one of the stages of democratization process. As a process, democratisation is not a unilinear process, but one that is relative, incremental, and variegated (Lewis, 2019; Osaghae, 1999). It is usually a transitional process involving overlapping stages namely; political liberalisation, collapse of authoritarian regime, democratic transition, and democratic consolidation (Haynes, 2002; Huntington, 1991; Shin & Tusalem, 2007). In the logic of causal sequence, the stages of democratisation may run from the decay and disintegration of an old authoritarian regime and the emergence of a new democratic system, through the consolidation of that democratic regime, to its maturity (Shin, 1994, p. 143). In this sense, the process of democratisation is highly complex with several analytically distinct stages that are empirically "complementary" and "overlapping". It is also multidimensional because one step of democratic development does not lead to a particular higher stage (Shin & Tusalem, 2007, p. 4). Like Haynes, Shin identifies four stages of democratization namely; decay of authoritarian rule; transition; consolidation; and the maturity of democratic order. However, the transition and consolidation stages have received more attention by scholars and writers (Shin, 1994, p. 143).

Indeed, "after democratic transition, the main challenge is to institutionalize democratic competition between groups and organizations with conflicting interest and aspirations, previously united in opposition to authoritarian rule" (Haynes, 2002, p. 17). This is subsumed

under the debate on "transitology"- the study of shifts from authoritarian to democratically-elected governments; and "consolidology"- the examination of the difficulties of making customary and deepening, democracy (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997; Haynes, 2002). These stages as mentioned are by no means straightforward but complex involving both contingent and structural factors as well as external forces (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997; Haynes, 2002). It is perhaps, because of this complexity and the variegated factors that engender it that Huntington (1991) argues that "the causes of democratisation are varied and their significance over time is likely to vary considerably" (p. 39). Implying that the forces that contribute to and impinge on democratisation are both time and environmentally bound.

Explaining further the aforementioned four-stages of democratisation, Haynes (2012, p. 2) argues that political liberalization is the process of reforming authoritarian rule or regime, while the stage of collapse of authoritarian regime refers to when a dictatorship falls apart. Democratic transition is the material shift to democracy, normally characterized by the accession to power of a democratically elected government, via free and fair election. Democratic consolidation involves the construction of the institutions of divided power. It is said to have occurred when contending social classes and political groups accept both formal rules and informal understandings determining political outcomes or politics. The democratic consolidation stage also privileges "strong" civil societies that keep an eye on the state and what it does with its power (Haynes, 2012, p. 3). This is to avoid arbitrariness and the corruption and abuse of power to the detriment of democratisation. What is more, transition to democracy stage embodies an institutionalized pattern of behaviour by political actors characterized by established process of political decision-making and coded procedure (Haynes, 2002). It features among others; drafting of methods or rule of resolving conflicts peacefully; promulgation of a new constitution; and holding of elections to mark the formal end to authoritarianism (Shin, 1994, p. 144). It is therefore convenient to say that Nigeria at the moment is going through democratic consolidation having successfully transited from military rule to democratically elected government. It is at the stage of embedding and institutionalizing democracy to make it a culture and norm. Unfortunately however, the process of democratic consolidation is bedevilled with crises which are not unconnected with the character of the political elite. The paper now focuses on this.

Political Elite and Implications for Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria:

To be clear, the political elite are a tiny but powerful group of individuals with vast network in Nigeria's political landscape. It is the group that controls the state and depends on Nigeria's oil wealth to underwrite its class/group interests (Amundsen, 2012). Besides, being a direct product of British colonialism, the political elite is committed to promoting the attitudes and ideology of capitalism and maintaining the peripheral status of the country in the global capitalist system (Orugbani, 2002, pp. 108-109). They are those who are able, by virtue of their authoritative positions in powerful organizations and movements of whatever kind, to affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially. Accordingly, political elite occupy the apex of the elite hierarchy because of their role as initiators and supervisors of policies with pervasive social consequences (Kifordu, 2011a, p 47). They are drawn from Nigeria's diverse ethnic, religious, social, and political groupings, lacking a clear vision or ideology for a broad social project, but united by a common goal of using the state as a source of patronage and

corrupt enrichment (Amundsen, 2012; Kifordu, 2011a; Obi, 2004). Thus, it is a parasitic and opportunistic group which depends on the state for survival and dominance of the political landscape (Kifordu, 2011a, 2011b; Obi, 2004).

Notable among this group at least in the present dispensation are members of the National Economic Council (NEC), a constitutional body made up of the President, Vice-President, past heads of state including those who served under military governments and the Governors of the 36 states of the federation; the Federal Executive Council; and the National Assembly- consisting of the Senate and House of Representatives; and those formally responsible in making and implementing important national decisions even at the political party level (Ibeanu, 2008; Kifordu, 2011b; Obi 2004). As Sklar et al (2006, p. 105) usefully observed, regardless of their differences the political elite share a more common belief on how to use the state to serve their own group interests than advancing the interests of their relatively poor kinsmen or supporters.

It has to be restated that ethnicity (and other primordial tendencies including religion) is only but functional for Nigeria's political elite who want to survive in the power struggle or to conceal exploitative practices by building solidarities across class lines (Ake 1991; Ihonvbere 1994; Obi, 2011). This tendency of the Political elite is common and pervasive in the country (Kifordu, 2011a, 2011b; Obi, 2004). It is instructive to remind us that in relation to our problem: The political elite support democracy only as a means to power… Democratic elections are being held to determine who will exercise the power of the State with no question asked about the character of the state as if it has no implication. But its implication is so serious that elections in Nigeria (Africa) give the voter only a choice between oppressors (Ake, 1996, p.5).

The political elite are held up in this contraption called the Nigerian State. Given the unyielding dominance of the State, they see democracy as a means to reach and control it. Democratization is reduced to just multiparty elections. Elections have therefore become for the political elite a means to capture state power through the instruments or platforms of political parties (Ake, 1996; Nwosu, 2006). It is observed that what we call political parties in Nigeria are electoral machines, formed by the political elite for no other purpose than to win elections. They are formed by individuals who invest their money in them (as in stocks and shares) and expect dividends through contracts and lucrative appointments (Ojo, 2002). The verdict is that "a self-regarding, opportunistic political class treats party affiliations and elections as transactions to be exploited for personal gain" (Lewis, 2019, pp. 81-82). Anifowose (1999) graphically sums up our observation when he argues:

The average Nigerian political elite view political parties largely as economic organization which must make profit. The higher the profit the more prosperous the investment and of course its shareholders are considered to be, hence, the desperation to ensure that the parties nearly always make profit. In this unique economic investment the surest means of making profit is to guarantee control of the state through the grip on political power, and for the parties this comes about through winning elections at all cost (p. 5).

The nature of this type of politics is such that it is reduced to the crude mechanics of opposing forces driven by the calculus of power. For everyone in this political arena, security lies only in the accumulation of power. The result is an unprecedented drive for power; power was

made the top priority in all circumstances and sought by all means (Ake, 1996, p. 3). Furthermore, Ake again avers that:

> The winners in the competition for power win everything. Nothing can be worse than losing, nothing better than winning. Thus, everyone seeks power by every means, legal or otherwise and those who already control state power try to keep it by every means. What emerges from this is a politics which does not know legitimacy or legality, only expediency. This politics is not conducive to political stability, the rule of law, or democracy because it constituted as warfare (Ake, 1996, pp. 7-8).

In the current democratization the political elite through the instrumentalities of political parties especially the notable ones among them namely Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressives Congress (APC), All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), and Labour Party (LP) all fight for elective positions guided by this same mentality of winning elections at all cost even against democratic principles and values. Indeed, since marketing political power investment is in itself conflictual, increase in its competitiveness raises the incidents of conflict and beyond a certain threshold the competition results into violence. And usually the spate of violence is so much that majority of voters refuse to come out to exercise their civic obligation and responsibility for fear of death as the political gladiators promise to make the elections a do-or-die affair, hence, the Hobbessian nature of party politics and the lack of democracy and development in Nigeria. This much is captured by Ake (1996) when he elucidates concerning political elite that:

> They are totally absorbed in the quest for absolute and eternal power. They know only their interests… Where every leader wants absolute power, society is at war, war without end because amidst the defeats and victories of particular battles, the underlying social dynamics remain the same. There is no development in a state of war. What there is, is regression and that is what Africa (Nigeria) has had. There is no democracy in war. What there is, is power and the contestation for power… permitting the strong to take what they can, leaving the rest to suffer what they must (p. 13).

At another level, the political elite have put democratization under serious jeopardy by the development and institutionalization of "Personality Cult". The situation as observed has degenerated as few individuals (the members of the cult) now dictate the course of democracy by choosing political party leaders at various levels (ward, local, state and federal) and candidates to contest general elections (Presidency, Senate, House of Representatives, Governorship, and House of Assemblies). Worse still, the scenario or situation has come to be an acceptable practice as political patronage, favours and rewards depend on individuals' loyalty to the 'power that be' or 'Cult'. Of course, this loyalty is now qualified to mean "military-type loyalty'. Indeed, one must be slavish, foolish, conforming, non-opinionated, and a moral *tabula rasa* to be qualified to get political patronage and favours from members of the cult. This remains for the political elite the height of political participation in the democratization process in Nigeria (Okolie, 2006). The institution of the 'personality cult' as shown in many parts of the country also manifests in the form of 'godfatherism'. Godfatherism fundamentally and crucially dictates the patterns and shape of party politics in Nigeria, a situation that portends grave danger to democratic consolidation given its anti-democratic and anti-people manifestations. Nnamani

(2003) paints a rather odious picture of the character of the Nigerian 'godfather' (that is, the political elite) when he states:

> Take it or leave it, the archetypal godfather in Nigeria is more than the ruthless Mario Puzo's kingpins in the Italian Mafia setting. While the fictional godfather is characterized as 'a shadowy, dare-devil recluse, who combines immense underworld financial muscle with near mythical powers of enormous proportions', which is to attain a further greasing of the ever-increasing vast financial empire, the Nigeria type has the added characterization of conceit, ego, loquacity, pettiness, envy, strife, crudity, and confusion (quoted in Albert, p.79).

The present democratic process in Nigeria shows that aspirants to political offices who are less financially buoyant rely greatly on the financial and logistic support of the political elite or 'money bags' in society who invariably become their 'political masters or godfathers'. The godfathers on the other hand may look for a popular and very outstanding character or even the opposite to invest their money by encouraging and sponsoring him to contest for elective office which will be manipulated in his favour through financial inducement of electoral officers, security operatives, thuggery or outright rigging of votes. In Anambra State we had Chris Uba and Chris Ngige, in Oyo State- Lamidi Adedibu and Ladoja, Lagos State- Bola Tinubu and Fashola/Ambode/Sanwo-Olu, Kwara State- Olushola Saraki and Bola Saraki, Rivers State- Nyesom Wike and Sim Fubara etc. Accordingly, it is now known in Nigeria that:

> … whenever an aspirant contested and lost an election, he expects the winner (godson) to settle him by offsetting whatever amount of money he had spent during the electioneering. The candidate in the first instance considers his electoral attempt as 'investment' which must yield profit, even though he may have known from day one that he cannot win a vote from his family talk-less of his ward or constituency (Awofeso, 2006, p. 3).

Usually the godfather and the godson sign nocturnal or secret agreements that ought to be binding on both parties. And most times the content of the agreement compels the godson on assumption of office to remit certain percentage of the treasury to the account of the godfather at specified intervals. The godfather is also expected to nominate reasonable number of persons into the cabinet of the godson. Other benefits or profits to be enjoyed by the godfather include: regular awards of contracts, unrestrained access to the godson, consultation on state matters by the godson etc. Thus, the political elite are busy trying all means to capture and privatize state power. As undemocratic as the means are, the process of democratization hardly means anything to the generality of the people. The process is a life-survival race, a zero-sum game because the political elite using state power are not only dominant in the political space but also control the resources of the state (Amuwo, 2009).

The state having been captured by the political elite, enjoys no distinction from its controllers. It is personalized away from the masses (Nwosu, 2006). The political elite in this unique political situation reproduce a conservative, contaminated, compromised and corrupted form of politics. Once the state is captured and personalized as is the case in the country, it is used to contain opposition at all levels (Ihonvbere, 2002). The containment of opposition to state power by the political elite is also justified in the name of development. To this end, Ake (1991) aptly elucidates to lend credence to this: "To discourage opposition and perpetuate their

power, they argued that the problems of development demanded complete unity of purpose, justifying on these grounds the criminalization of political dissent and the inexorable march to political monolithism (p. 32). For as Ake (1996) further explains which is generally the reality in Nigeria's democracy:

The character of the state rules out a politics of moderation and mandates a politics of lawlessness and extremism for the simple reason that the nature of the state makes the capture of state power irresistibly attractive… What emerges from this is politics which does not know legitimacy or loyalty, only expediency (p. 15).

The political elite, the people and democratic consolidation in Nigeria:

Another area where democratic consolidation in Nigeria has suffered grave deficit is in the area of the people's involvement or participation in the entire process. Participation is one of the core democratic qualities and/or institutions of representative democracy together with competition and legitimacy. Participation is considered a *sine qua non* of any kind of democracy. Rule by the people of logical necessity involves participation especially through elections (Lindberg, 2004, p. 66). Recall that Dahl (2000, pp.33-38), one of the renowned scholars of liberal democracy identified effective participation and equality in voting among the five fundamental criteria of democracy without which no country or society can lay claim of being a democracy. Again, Lindberg and Morrison (2008) remind us that, "The core institution of modern democracy whereby the right of the people to self-government can be exercised is competitive and participatory elections" (p. 95). Thus, election becomes critical for democratic consolidation as it enhances political participation and the legitimacy of government. Indeed, "democratization by election' is one explanatory mechanism for the "resurgence of democracy" under the "third wave" (Lindberg, 2009). However, as noted above, the subsisting democratization in Nigeria has been heavily deficit in terms of the people's participation in the process. This scenario is succinctly captured by Ake (1996) when he argued that:

Our politics is not a lawful competition to select those to manage our commonwealth but a fight to capture and privatize an enormous power resource… there is only a battlefield where the act of doing battle constitutes us as purely negative unity… So democracy has a huge problem (p. 8).

This suggests that there is hardly any real involvement of the people in the process especially in the selection of candidates from the party level to the general elections. The internal structures and processes of the political parties in Nigeria are fundamentally and largely undemocratic. National Democratic Institute {NDI} (2011) observes that "most party primaries were conducted under opaque conditions and several party leaders hand-picking many of the candidates" (p. 8). What is more, "Despite nominally open primary process... the public has virtually no input on how parties select candidates" (LeVan & Ukata, 2012, p. 1). The ruling party particularly "chooses its leaders without meaningful transparency or public accountability" (LeVan, 2014, p. 116). Besides, "Procedural problems included an overall lack of transparency, winners being subsequently changed by party leaderships, and parties not having objective criteria for screening candidates" (European Union-Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM, 2019, p. 4). Jega (2012), a former Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) contends that the situation is exacerbated by the fact that the Electoral Act "forbids

INEC from removing a candidate from election list, once he was submitted by the party, for whatever reason, and we ended up with parties sending us people who did not even go through democratic primaries" (p. 5). Indeed, lending credence to Jega's assertion, Obe (2019) further argues that:

> It would seem that although by law INEC is supposed to oversee party primaries and conventions, its presence is only felt when contending factions within a party are unable to reconcile their differences, or hold rival state conventions: INEC hardly scrutinizes the actual integrity of the primaries (p. 112).

Three cases are worth recalling at this point. First, is the case in Rivers State in 2007 when former Governor Rotimi Amaechi who originally was selected by the PDP as the governorship candidate of the party but was wrongfully and illegally substituted with Sir Celestine Omehia by the leadership of the party at the centre. However, this was overturned by the Supreme Court which ruled that the replacement or substitution was in violation of the Electoral Act. Second, again in Rivers State in 2019 the State chapter of APC conducted party congresses to select candidates of the party for the governorship and State Assembly elections to the exclusion of some members of the party and in gross violation of a valid court order. This subsequently led the final court at that level to nullify the entire process and consequently exclude the Rivers APC from participating in the governorship and State Assembly general elections in 2019. Finally, in Zamfara State in the northern part of the country, INEC tried to use the limited discretion it had to disqualify the APC from fielding candidates in Zamfara on the grounds that the party did not conduct primary elections in the state within the time stipulated by Independent National Electoral Commission {INEC} (EU-EOM, 2019, pp. 19-20). Besides, most of the general elections since 1999 have been rigged and bogged down by violence and low voter turnout and vote buying (Bratton 2008; EU-EOM, 2023; NDI, 2011; Obe, 2019). The last general elections in 2023 were conducted against the background of economic crises, with growing unemployment and poverty rates, high inflation, and widespread fuel scarcity across the country. The situation was exacerbated by the Federal Government decision to implement the naira reissue policy. All this affected the participation of majority of Nigerians (voters) in the elections as the existential economic and political realities led to increasing voter disenchantment (EU-EOM, 2023, pp. 10-11).

Besides, the activities and dominance of 'big men' or 'godfathers' (an influential section of the political elite) in Nigerian's democratization process is hugely and fundamentally responsible for the incessant and perpetual crises that have bedevilled and engulfed the major political parties in the country including APC, PDP, LP, APGA to mention but a few. This has equally snowballed and led to increased instability, incoherence, and distrust, as well as the inability of the ruling party to engender good governance on one hand and failure of opposition parties to promote effective and robust opposition on the other. Overall, democratic consolidation is undermined and, therefore in crises. The 'end bad governance protests' of 1st to 10th August 2024 by ordinary Nigerians eloquently demonstrate the appalling state of governance in Nigeria under the ruling APC Federal Government and the intractable and unending crises bedevilling opposition political parties especially the PDP and LP which clearly make a potent case for weak opposition political party in Nigeria's democracy. Recall also that it has been rightly argued that political opposition is a prerequisite for democratic consolidation and without it "there is no choice and when there is no choice the people cannot exercise their right to rule"

(Lindberg, 2006, p. 124). Furthermore, Uddhammar and his co-authors (2011, pp. 1057-1066) argue that, the democratic process is weakened when opposition political parties stumble and totter. Opposition political parties not only offer alternative platforms for citizens' participation in politics and policy-making processes, but also provide considerable resistance and check on the ruling party. According to Jinadu (2007), the perverse form the crises of democratic consolidation has assumed has been fed by a regnant combination of a political culture which de-politicizes politics, by reducing it to a lawless vocation and disempowering the generality of the people through the violation of their sovereignty as constitutionally provided in Chapter 2 of the 1999 constitution. Thus, ordinary people hardly matter to the political elite in Nigeria. There is hardly any incentive for the people to go and vote during elections because the will of the people is easily subverted by the political elite in favour of their chosen or anointed candidates. This is worsened by the impoverished and wretched state of majority of the people who are easily bought with money or other material gifts/benefits.

Consequently, democratic consolidation is not significantly advanced by giving the vote to the poor while remaining indifferent to the crippling constraints of poverty. For poverty disempowers and subverts democracy (Ake, 1996). In 2023 nearly 12% of the world population in extreme poverty live in Nigeria, making the country the capital of global poverty. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2022 report shows that 63% of Nigerians (133 million) are multi-dimensionally poor (NBS, 2022). The situation has only deepened with the removal of fuel subsidy by the present Tinubu-led APC Government at his inauguration on May 29 2023. Indeed, the political elite have failed in providing the majority of Nigerians the opportunity to participate meaningfully and benefit from the democratization process. Thus, democratic consolidation in Nigeria has very serious problems of thriving in the circumstances.

Conclusion

Against the foregoing, the paper concludes that until and unless the above problems and/or characteristics of the political elite are concretely and adequately addressed, democracy and indeed democratic consolidation in Nigeria will remain crises-ridden and embattled. This is particularly so because societies and political systems rise and fall on leadership and going by the "iron law of oligarchy' the political elite will always rule. So, until the challenges facing that section of society are tackled democratic consolidation will remain endangered.

Recommendations

The paper recommends as follows:

1. The transformation of the Nigerian State to make it a truly people's State through constitution reforms. This will fundamentally address the problems or challenges of the political elite and by extension democratic consolidation. This will free the State from the grip of and privatization by the political elite
2. Improve and increase citizens' political participation through mass education and enlightenment. This will help get the people to take ownership of democratization and make the political elite more accountable to the people.
3. Economic and welfare upliftment of ordinary people through economic empowerment programme. It must be stated that poverty subverts and disempowers democracy. Thus,

improvement in the economic conditions of majority of the people will enhance democratic consolidation.

4. The promotion of electoral reforms that will address the challenges confronting the electoral process, electoral management body- INEC, and the political parties. Overall, the reforms should ensure the financial and administrative autonomy of INEC and internal democracy in the political parties as well as ensure the punishment of electoral offenders and defaulters.

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