

## THE MULTI-PARTY SYSTEM AND THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*This paper interrogates the assumption by liberal democracy promoters that a multiparty system is a necessary condition for democratic practice. Based on insights from Nigeria's experiment with the multiparty system which has led to the emergence of a strong ruling party and a multiplicity of opposition parties too weak to challenge its dominance, it is argued that a misguided proliferation of political parties poses a credible challenge to democratic consolidation. We conclude that the extent to which a multiparty system contributes to democratic consolidation is highly context-specific and depends more on the development of democratic culture and prevailing local political and economic processes.*

**Keyword:** elections, democracy, multiparty system, democratic consolidation, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Theorists and promoters of democracy, particularly of the liberal hue, take as minimum conditions for democratic practice, periodic, free and competitive elections on a multiparty basis. Political parties, in particular, have been taken as central to modern representative democracy, because they are presumed to be gatekeepers to the political system since they aggregate and articulate the interests of the broad masses. Parties are presumed to represent these interests since direct democracy has become impracticable. Among writers

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who stress the centrality of political parties to democratic practice, Bryce (1921) and Schattschneider (1942) seem to stand out. Bryce (1921), for instance, wonders what representative democracy would be like without political parties. Schattschneider was even much more magisterial in tone. According to him ‘political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the political parties’ (Schattschneider 1942, 1). Following from this assumption, the former eastern bloc and post-independent African regimes, most of which had one-party systems, were dismissed as undemocratic, authoritarian and illiberal by liberal democracy promoters and scholars. Indeed, the first three decades of post-colonial African experience offered a basis for conclusion that one-party system was inconsistent with democracy as the African political landscape was festooned with highly illiberal, authoritarian and oppressive regimes, some of which were anchored on false Marxist-Leninist one-party model. In defence of one-party rule, African rulers had to offer justifications, which were hardly more than mere rationalizations. Among a multitude of justifications offered by African rulers were that one party system was consistent with pre-colonial African political experience; the promotion of urgently needed national unity which may be jeopardized by unnecessary partisan squabbles; and the vanguard role of the political party ‘in ensuring industrial development and the promotion of basic human needs...’(Schraeder 2004, 225).

The ‘third wave’ of democracy which coincided not only with the collapse of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) but also the spread of democracy to hitherto authoritarian enclaves changed all that. With the collapse of communism, many African rulers encouraged by Western governments and donor agencies, questioned the need to continue with one-party systems. Frederick Chiluba, at the time a leader of a pro-democracy movement who later became the Zambian President, for instance, captured the popular sentiment against the one-party system advocated by some Africans when he reportedly asked: ‘if the owners of socialism have withdrawn from the one-party system, who are the Africans to continue with it?’ (Schraeder 2004, 224). What followed was the crowding (or apparent liberalization) of the African political space

with many parties and the introduction of competitive elections, a development that was generally seen as a victory for democracy over authoritarianism – the political equivalent of the seeming victory of capitalism over socialism/communism.

Like many other African countries that had been under military or one-party rule, Nigeria emerged from the suffocating grip of military authoritarianism to civil rule anchored on periodic, competitive elections on a multiparty basis. Since Nigeria's current experiment with democratization, the number of political parties has grown from just three to 63, with the People's Democratic Party (PDP) emerging as a strong ruling party and the rest feckless and too weak to challenge its dominance. How well has this served the cause of democracy? More pointedly, to what extent has Nigeria's multiparty system promoted democratic consolidation? This paper attempts a reflection on 13 years of democratic rule in Nigeria with particular emphasis on the party system. Based on insights from Nigeria's experiment with multiparty system which has led to a weakening of the opposition, it is argued that a misguided proliferation of political parties poses a credible challenge to democratic consolidation.

The rest of the paper is in four parts. Following this introduction is the theoretical fulcrum of the paper. Here, attempts are made to examine the centrality of political parties to democracy. This necessarily calls for a review of the extant literature on political parties and democratic practice. We conclude this section by taking the position that while a multi-party system no doubt expands the space for political participation, this apparent expansion is of dubious value in terms of the development of democracy. The extent to which this leads to democratic consolidation in the political space is, at best, highly context-specific and depends more on local conditions, particularly the reasons behind political party formation than on the mere formal provision for a multiplicity of parties. This compels a strong need to focus attention on the political economy of party-formation, the subject of the section that follows. Here we examine the key drivers of Nigeria's multiparty system by focusing attention on the narrow interests pursued by the leadership of opposition parties. The consequence of this is the misguided proliferation of

(1991) *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and Putnam et al. (1993), among other studies, celebrated what they saw as the 'universalisation' of liberal democracy. More specifically, Fukuyama (1989, 3) with a ring of finality, averred that:

(w)hat we are witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or a passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

Not long after this celebration of the universalisation of democracy, the lessons of experience suggested that such triumphalism was, at best, misplaced: though multiparty elections had been held in many parts of the world, democratisation had not yet arrived. Certainly, liberalism was not part and parcel of the expansion of the political space. The introduction of what would otherwise be considered irreducible minimum conditions for democratic rule, namely multiple political parties as well as periodic and competitive elections to non-Western climes, had not led to a corresponding flourishing of basic liberal values that are critical to the survival of democracy. If anything, it brought about a transmutation of authoritarianism; not any sort of democratic consolidation. Fareed Zakaria (1996), Robert Kaplan (1997), Claude Ake (2002) and Levitsky and Wey (2002) among other scholars, drew popular and scholarly attention to this development. Zakaria (1996, 24), for instance pointed out that: 'far from being a temporary or transitional stage, it appears that many countries are settling into a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism.'

Larry Diamond's findings (cited in Zakaria, 1996) were equally disconcerting: 10 of 22 Latin American countries that had embarked on the democratisation journey 'have levels of human rights abuses that are incompatible with the consolidation of (liberal) democracy.' In Africa, Claude Ake (2002) questioned the feasibility of liberal

political parties which results, on the one hand, in the emergence of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) as the hegemonic party and on the other hand, a plethora of opposition parties, too weak to constitute a credible challenge to the PDP dominance. The implications of the rise of a pseudo-multiparty system in relation to the quality of democracy on offer in Nigeria are further examined. In the fourth and final section, we reflect on thirteen years of multi-party democracy in Nigeria and draw our conclusions.

### **Theoretical Statement**

A review of the literature on political parties in contemporary democracy would reveal what van Biezen (2003, 171) considers to be two 'seemingly incompatible propositions' that would appear to 'have received the status of conventional wisdom.' The first, spearheaded by Bryce (1921) stresses the indispensability of political parties to representative democracy, a view that gained resonance in Schattschneider (1942), who, as we earlier indicated, advances the case for the centrality of political parties to democratic practice. For him, democracy is inconceivable except in terms of political parties. The second, canvassed by Schmitter (2001), takes a deeply pessimistic and even nostalgic view of political parties in contemporary democracies, suggesting that parties have lost the representational and governmental roles they once played in democracies. The debate on political parties and democracy would appear to have been largely shaped by this optimist-pessimist divide. The post Cold-War era witnessed in most African and other so-called emerging democracies an expansion of the political space that was by all account phenomenal. In the Western hemisphere, Zakaria (1996) observes that elections were held in all countries except Cuba.

In Africa, democratisation proceeded at an extraordinarily rapid rate: within six months in 1990, the ban on multiparty electoral contests had been lifted in much of Francophone Africa and competitive elections had been held in many of the 45 sub-Saharan African states with 18 elections held in 1996 alone. This rapid spread of elections (or is it democracy?) generated much popular and scholarly optimism that this ferment of political activities would inexorably lead to the deepening of democracy. Samuel Huntington's

democracy in the African clime. Similar pessimism ran through the work of Michael Chege (cited in Zakaria, 1996). After a study of the African scene, he came to the inescapable conclusion that the third wave of democratisation ‘had overemphasized multiparty elections...and correspondingly neglected the basic tenets of liberal governance’.

Among other democratic institutions that were blamed for the devaluating of democracy were political parties. Though the centrality of political parties in mass democracy would appear to have assumed the status of conventional wisdom as Bryce (1921) and Schattschneider (1942) would seem to suggest, van Biezen (2004) makes the point that antiparty sentiments ran through the democratic theories of John Locke and J.J. Rousseau who saw political parties as a ‘threat to the general interest or as overriding the interests of the individual’ (van Biezen 2004, 3). In a title that was highly nostalgic, Schmitter (2001) lamented the declining role of political parties in modern democracy. Lamenting that ‘Parties are not what they once were’, he makes the point that there is a general decline in the functioning of political parties in mass democracies as political parties are increasingly becoming irrelevant as vehicles for representation, instrument for mobilisation for political participation and interest aggregation and articulation. This sentiment is widely shared in the literature on comparative democratisation, though for different reasons. Dalton (2004), for instance, reports increasing loss of confidence in political parties, politicians and other institutions of mass democracy in the established democracies. As it relates to political parties in the newly democratising countries, evidence suggests that the cause of democratic consolidation has not been helped by the political parties. Shoesmith (2012), for instance, argues that the proliferation of political parties in Timor Leste and the unstable coalition governments this throws up not only retards the process of democratic consolidation but also undermines effective state governance and restricts rather than broadens democratic representation. In a similar vein, Simonida Kacarsca (2008) examines the question of political parties and democratic consolidation in Macedonia, focusing on the political parties’

relationship with the state. He concludes that political parties in Macedonia have delayed the process of democratic consolidation through the increased dominance of the party in state institutions, low level of system supportiveness and problems in maintaining effective opposition within the system. As it relates to political parties in Nigeria, Omotola (2010) points out the inherent weaknesses in Nigerian political parties and questions their capacity to engender democracy and political stability in the country. He makes the point that political parties have become a liability rather than an asset to democracy and development. While suggesting a need for reform of political parties and politics in Nigeria generally, he however does not question the proliferation of political parties as one of the problems, if not the main problem, with democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

While it is not completely irrelevant to argue that small parties may be incapable of constituting a credible challenge to the dominant party (Karcasca, 2008) or forming stable coalitions (Shoesmith, 2012) and therefore may retard the process of democratic consolidation, this does not quite help understanding of the Nigerian case. Political parties, by their very nature are formed by individuals with the sole purpose of presenting candidates for election and ultimately forming governments. The Nigerian case study however presents a situation in which political parties seek to [contest] win elections, at all costs if necessary, not [necessarily] to form government but mainly as platforms for the pursuit of the parochial interest of the party leadership – this interest being the accumulation of wealth and power. This element of the argument is not new. It represents the deepening of the process that has been ongoing in Nigerian politics (Ekekwe; 1986; Ake, 1985; Joseph, 1986). The pursuit of parochial interests by leaders of both the ruling and the opposition parties plays to the advantage of the ruling party, which first won power with the passing of the authoritarian old regime. In Nigeria, the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) has deftly exploited and taken full advantage of the inclination of the opposition parties to consolidate its hold on power. Taking this position is not necessarily to advance the argument that size does not matter. It is rather to draw attention to how this phenomenon is deeply, in itself,

undemocratic and cannot, therefore, advance democratisation. To be sure, most of the 63 political parties in Nigeria have narrow bases, with followership not extending much beyond the family and friends of their founders. While the small size of political parties may matter in effectively constituting a challenge to the overwhelming dominance of the PDP, the real problem of democratic consolidation in Nigeria lies directly in the apparent reason for political party formation. This is the argument that this paper advances. It focuses on the economic underpinning of party formation to explain the proliferation of political parties in Nigeria and further argues that this has retarded the process of democratic consolidation. In what follows, attention is focused on how this plays out in Nigeria.

### **The Political Economy of Party Formation in Nigeria**

Nigeria has had a long, but by no means, enviable history of multiparty electoral competition within the relatively short period of the development of political parties in the country. Much of the details of party formation in Nigeria contained below are largely drawn from the rather authoritative and classic study by Richard Sklar (2004). Apart from the initial dominance of the pre-independent political space by the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), the first political party in Nigeria formed in 1923 in response to the introduction of the 'elective principle' by the colonial administration, the years that followed heralded the emergence of a variety of political parties. These included the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) in 1934, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC) in 1944, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) in 1949 and the Action Group which sprang from the Yoruba socio-cultural group, Egbe Omo Oduduwa in 1950. A splinter group of radical youths broke away from the Northern-based political party, the NPC to form the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) in 1951. These political parties animated the anti-colonial struggle until 1960 when the country was granted formal independence. They also animated the ethno-regional politics that defined much of the early post-independence Nigeria, with the NPC, AG and NCNC firmly establishing regional dominance in the Northern, Western and Eastern regions, respectively. As key drivers of post-

independence politics, these political parties suffered a setback with the military coup d'état of 1966 that truncated civil politics as political parties were banned. As part of an elaborate programme of return to civil rule in 1979, three political parties were registered, namely the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). This number later increased when the second round of elections were to be conducted. The Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), the Nigerian Advanced Party (NAP) and the Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP) were the late entrants.

The aborted transition to Nigeria's Third Republic also witnessed an avalanche of political associations intent on becoming political parties. In the ironic turn of events, however, the military government formed two political parties, namely the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC) – described by its promoters in terms of ideological leaning as 'a little to the left' and 'a little to the right', respectively and directed politicians to join them or stay out. This indeed was the height of irony in the sense that the norm in political practice worldwide is that parties form government with the mandate of the electorate and not that unelected governments form the parties. Post-military Nigeria, the focus of this paper, also began with three political parties, namely the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). This number increased to five by the second round of elections. By the third round of elections, the body saddled with the responsibility of electoral administration, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), registered over 60 political parties. Seven of these have now been de-registered ostensibly for being dormant.

A point often made about political parties in Nigeria is that they are bereft of any identifiable ideological leanings (Omotola, 2010). This statement is perhaps quite true especially as it is difficult to identify political parties in Nigeria with basic ideological values such as liberalism or conservatism as one would find in advanced Western democracies. Even when the party manifesto suggests any ideological leaning, at the level of praxis, it is hard to draw a fine ideological line in terms of the policy content of states governed by

parties with seemingly different ideological orientations. To put it differently, it is hardly possible to discern any difference among the political parties that are currently in power in the various states of the federation strictly in terms of the content of policies on offer. What cannot be gainsaid is that the behaviour of political parties and politicians in Nigeria would appear to have been dominated by certain common values, negative or positive, in the various phases of the nation's evolution. We will attempt to specify what we consider as the defining collective values among Nigeria's political parties and politicians in the various phases of the nation's evolution.

In the anti-colonial era when they first emerged in Nigeria, the collective goal of political parties was the need to wrest and acquire power from the colonisers. Thus decolonisation, with a view to controlling the state and bringing development therewith, would appear to be the defining interest of political parties in that era. In the post-independence era, however, and with it the intensification of the struggle for access to the state, and the full exposure of hitherto thinly veiled fangs of ethnicity, it became clear that the basis for the unity of the various nationalities had yet to be established. As the regional-based political parties took firm hold of the various regions, the dominant collective interest that shaped the ideology, programme and behaviour of political parties would appear to be the pursuit of power for primitive accumulation – this being the meaning of so-called development. But if this had to be successful, it had to be done through the apparent promotion of ethno-regional interests (Ekekwe, 1986). The Second Republic, 1979–1983, seemed to have witnessed no fundamental shift in the strategy and goal of power for the political parties - they sought power for the promotion of personal interests at the expense of the public interest. In the post-1999 period, the single-minded pursuit of power and the passion to hold on to it, once captured, for primitive accumulation, has been pushed to new heights. This is evident in the new phenomenon of personal political parties: parties that are owned and controlled by an individual or a few individuals, not so much for the purpose of necessarily winning elections but strictly as negotiating platforms for access to patronage, prestige and wealth.

Patronage, prestige and wealth may be derived through the instrumentality of political parties in one of three ways. First, just for being so registered, every political party was entitled to a handsome grant ostensibly for electioneering purposes – it was only in recent times that the INEC stopped this practice whereby the state was funding private ambitions and appetites. In this regard, some political parties simply collected the money, which ended up in the pockets of the party leader(s) and not in electioneering campaigns. It was thus not unusual to find a political party in which the National Chairman also ends up as the presidential candidate or indeed the candidate for all major positions to be contested at different times since each position to be contested for attracted state funding in its own right.

The second manifestation of political party as a means of livelihood find expression where a dominant political party or an influential figure who emerges as standard-bearer of a dominant political party surreptitiously sponsors his faithful to emerge as the flag-bearer of a possible strong rival political party in the race. In this scenario, the candidate goes into the race as the flag bearer of the opposition party with all the pretences of being a candidate in the election only to end up secretly working in favour of his contender. A third manifestation may find expression when a plethora of feckless multiple parties provide legitimacy and thus acceptance for an otherwise fundamentally fraudulent election. In this case, elections are rigged but instead of speaking against the flawed election, the opposition political parties come together as a group to issue a joint public statement to the effect that the election result is acceptable to them as it reflects the popular will of the electorate. This pattern of opposition parties in Nigeria has been reported by Ibrahim (2007:xxi). According to him:

...the fact that some opposition parties were the ones that conceded victory to the ruling party and were the first to congratulate those declared winners from the flawed process has raised fears that some opposition parties were established and funded by the ruling party and the presidency.

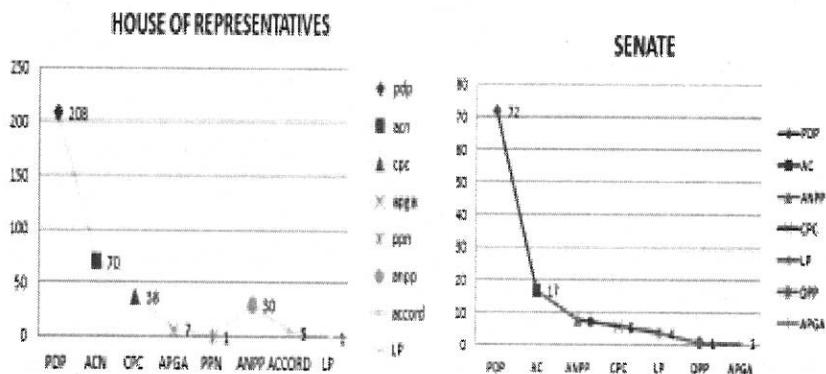
Ordinarily, a defeated candidate in the more mature democracies would congratulate a winner. In Nigeria, however, this aspect of the culture of democracy has been turned into a farce. This is because electoral contests are hardly free and fair and in part because given a general notion of politics as opportunities for enrichment and accumulation, it is rare for a loser to concede defeat. More often, even a convinced loser goes to a post-election tribunal to continue the fight, especially when a contestant in the opposing party is regarded as an enemy. Thus, this new found behaviour of political parties in which the opposition easily concedes defeat is not about a new dawn in Nigerian politics but is predicated largely on alleged huge bribes or promises of accommodation through juicy political appointments by the dominant party. And herein lies the instrumentality of political party as a means of livelihood in Nigeria's current experiment with democratic rule.

It has since been established that even in the First Republic, 1960–1966, politicians used the state and the political parties as means for private enrichment. The difference between then and now, however, is the degree to which this trend has been deepened. While politicians in the First Republic certainly promoted their parochial interests, corruption, which played a role in the process, was not as pervasive as it has now become – of course, the level of corruption was bad enough to have been cited as one of the reasons for the military overthrow of the government in January 1966. The abuse of public office for private gain became virtually second nature to politicians and public office-holders in Nigeria with the advent of Nigeria's Second Republic. Subsequent regimes, especially under the military, would appear to have elevated corruption to a high art, perhaps indeed a national ethic. As key instruments for the formation of government in representative democracy, the political parties in Nigeria have become main channels for both access to the state and thus opportunities for corruption. As such, the parties are not to any appreciable degree playing the classic role of political parties in representative democracy.

This begins to explain the apparent contradiction between the high number of registered political parties ostensibly for space in a democratic enterprise, but in reality choking out democracy. As we

pointed out earlier, the election management body, the Independent Electoral Commission, registered 63 political parties. Out of these, seven have been de-registered, leaving 56 political parties. Available records from the recent governorship and National Assembly elections in 2011 suggest that a handful of political parties took part in those elections. In more specific terms, in the 2011 Nigeria's Senatorial and House of Representatives elections, only seven and eight political parties, respectively, out of the lot, were able to win any seats. The rest, literally, also ran.

But let us look at the figures again. That eight political parties won seats in Nigeria's National Assembly elections does not capture the essence of that electoral outcome. As the figures below would reveal, of the 109 Senatorial districts in Nigeria, the PDP secured a seemingly impressive lead of 72 seats (representing 66.06%) of the total seats. Similarly, of the eight political parties that contested in elections into the Federal House of Representatives, the PDP won 208 (representing 67.8%) of total number of seats. The other seven parties that won seats into parliament in that election namely: Action Congress of Nigeria, (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change, (CPC), the All Nigeria Peoples Party, (ANPP); the All Progressive Grand Alliance, (APGA), the Accord Party (AP), the Peoples Party of Nigeria, (PPN), and the Labour Party(LP), performed quite poorly. They won only 70 (19.4%), 38 (10.6 %), 30 (8.3%), 7 (1.9%), 5 (1.4%), 1 (1.3%) and 1 (1.3%) seats respectively. The pattern was not different in the 2011 gubernatorial election results for 26 out of 36 states where elections were held.



**Figure 1: Nigeria National Assembly Elections - 2011**

*Source: compiled from the National Assembly website: [www.nassng.org](http://www.nassng.org)*

The fact that only a few of the multitude of registered political parties took part in critical national elections makes it imperative to seek plausible explanations why so many political parties in Nigeria would seem to be content to exist only in name. As we pointed out earlier, political parties in Nigeria have abandoned the traditional role of parties and become instruments for access to the state and therefore for private accumulation – the state serving as the main channels through which the largest percentage of national resources are redistributed. This is not very difficult to imagine in an economy that depends overwhelmingly on oil and gas, and the state receives and redistributes all the royalties and taxes from the sector. Since parties are there for purposes other than winning elections, those of them in opposition have long become unserious about pooling their resources and creating the synergy and momentum that could effectively challenge the PDP dominance. This emergence of pseudo-multiparty system in Nigeria and how this devalues the quality of democracy is the subject to which we now turn.

### **The Rise of Multi-party System and the Death of Democracy**

How does the phenomenon of pseudo-multiparty system in Nigeria affect democratic consolidation? We agree that the problem with the concept of democratic consolidation is that it is one term that is

often used “for vastly different things” (Schedler, 1998, 91). This ‘reigning conceptual disorder’ as Schedler (1998, 91) notes ‘is acting as a powerful barrier to scholarly communication, theory building, and the accumulation of knowledge.’ Schedler observes that in its original meaning, democratic consolidation was generally taken to be ‘the challenge of making new democracies secure, of extending their life expectancy beyond the short term, of making them immune against the threat of authoritarian regression, of building dams against eventual “reverse waves”.’ However, with the globalisation of democracy and the emergence of some challenges in the democratisation experiences of nations, scholarly attention shifted away from mere stabilisation or duration of democracy to the more substantive issue of the quality of democracy. Here, democratic consolidation became associated with qualities such as :

popular legitimization, the diffusion of democratic values, the neutralization of anti-system actors, civilian supremacy over the military, the elimination of authoritarian enclaves, party building, the organization of functional interests, the stabilization of electoral rules, the routinization of politics, the decentralization of state power, the introduction of mechanisms of direct democracy, judicial reform, the alleviation of poverty, and economic stabilization. (Schedler (1998, 91)

This view of democratic consolidation has been criticized. Among other scholars, Steven Friedman (2011) dismisses it as vague, teleological and a reification of liberal democracy as the ideal to which all societies should aspire to attain. While the logical foundation of these criticisms is no doubt sound, it is doubtful if an alternative view of democratic consolidation has been offered. For us, however, democratic consolidation here is used to imply both the duration and quality of performance of democratic regimes. It includes, especially, the deepening of the democratic culture: freedom of speech and association, tolerance of opposing views and debate and transparency. It is within this democratic cultural context that liberal democracy and its party political processes can be regarded as a ‘game’ as opposed to a ‘war’. Where these traits are lacking

then political parties, properly so called, cannot take root and thrive. The associations which emerge become more like power machines and the politics associated with them become infused with authoritarianism and a high degree of instability – frequent changing of party executives, lack of clarity in policy and programme and constant decamping of some groups from one association to another. The survival of parties in power does not reflect the general approval by the electorate of its policies but mainly of its ability to manipulate the electoral rules and personnel charged with elections at all levels. It would be highly misleading to thus see longevity of any party in power, no matter how many times it changes those it places in state offices, as any sign of democratic consolidation. Our notion of democratic consolidation will form the framework around which we examine the key question raised in this paper.

Nigeria's current experiment with democracy since 1999 has been the longest in the country's 54-year history as an independent jurisdiction. Not only is it the longest, it is also the first time that elections have been successfully organised by civilian regimes to mark the transfer of power from one government to another. Within the thirteen years of democratic journey, there have been strong indications suggesting that Nigerians are agreed that 'democracy is the only game in town'. To be sure, the challenges that would have led to military takeover of government in the past have been successfully resolved through democratic institutions. A few examples would suffice. In 2006, then Nigeria's President, Gen Olusegun Obasanjo, tried to sneak past the nation what came to be popularly known as the tenure elongation bill by which he would prolong his stay in office beyond the two terms allowed by the constitution. This created a lot of disaffection in the land. The problem was, however, eventually resolved when the PDP-dominated national assembly garnered the rare courage to reject the bill. Then came the 2009 unwarranted power vacuum, in which a cabal was bent on preventing the then Vice President, now Nigeria's current President, from being sworn in as Acting President in light of the incapacitation of President Yar'Adua by ill-health. Here again, the National Assembly, awakened from slumber by peaceful protests by civil society groups rose to the occasion. It is also important to

note that with the exception of the post-election violence that attended the declaration of the results of the 2011 presidential election, all post-election grievances have been settled in courts. Many state Governors have been removed from office by judicial pronouncements. Even the aggrieved candidate in the 2011 presidential election, Gen Muhammadu Buhari, went to the courts after the spontaneous outburst of violence in the Northern half of the country. Throughout these turbulent times, nobody and no group openly canvassed the need for the military to step in to restore order. This seeming capacity to resolve such challenges through democratic institutions have led many Nigerians to conclude that the country is on the right track to democratic consolidation. Nigeria's President, Goodluck Jonathan, was no less upbeat in his 2012 Democracy Day celebration address. In a speech that was heavily loaded with powerful doses of optimism, he declared that '(o)ur democracy is stable. Its foundation is strong and firm. Its future is bright' (Jonathan, 2012). If only these were really quite so!

Ordinarily, thirteen years is quite short to warrant much celebration. However, within the context of Nigeria's post-independence chequered history, heavily punctuated with coups and counter-coups, thirteen years of unbroken civil rule, involving change of the leadership baton among three elected presidents, would seem like a feat. More importantly, until Nigeria's current experiment with democracy, it had not been possible for a civilian government to conduct an election that was generally acclaimed as free and fair like the 2011 presidential election. These seeming positive credentials of democratic consolidation, however, conceal more than they reveal. They do not, for instance, reveal the deep-seated crisis of lack of the culture of democracy in the polity, and even among the ruling class and therefore in their political parties. They also conceal the real reasons for the proliferation of political parties which have been unable to challenge the dominance of the PDP in spite of its poor record of delivering the so-called democratic dividends. The existing situation and its contradictions do not enhance our understanding of the difference between elections and democracy. It would be preferable to focus more attention on these observations.

As it relates to the crisis of internal democracy, this problem has its foundations in the neo-patrimonial structure of ‘godfatherism’ that has largely shaped the politics of Nigeria’s Fourth Republic. Godfatherism suggests the emerging phenomenon in Nigerian politics in which key decisions, particularly the choice of candidates for elective offices in the party and state institutions are determined, not by popular choice of party members but by the preferences of key powerful individuals, referred to as the godfathers. The candidates so imposed on the party are almost always unpopular. The most important qualification they need to have is blind and unquestioning loyalty to the godfathers. In the event of confusion, fraud and violence that have characterised elections thus far, these unpopular candidates are seen through the electoral process by their godfathers. With few exceptions, this translates to the emergence of elected officials who derive their mandates and owe allegiance not to the people over whom they rule or represent but to the ‘godfathers’ who are able to buy votes and, where necessary, buy off any legal challenges. Even when inter-party electoral contests would seem to be free and fair, the fact of imposition of party flag-bearers suggests that the electorate is confronted with the dilemma of voting for one out of a number of undemocratically selected flag-bearers. This crisis of internal democracy is largely implicated in the general crisis of governance that defines Nigeria’s current democratic experiment. The implications of these for performance and democratic accountability are obvious. First, incompetent, visionless and sometimes ill-prepared candidates for public service are catapulted into party and state institutions, over the heads of the people. Second, due to the circumstances of their emergence, politicians in Nigeria, with very few exceptions, and at all levels, strive more towards satisfying their godfathers and certainly not the people whom they rule or represent.

More importantly, it is instructive that though four national elections have been conducted over the past 13 years – and notwithstanding the large number of registered political parties–this transfer of power at the federal level has been like a game of musical chairs within one party the PDP. As indicated earlier, the ruling political party, the PDP has maintained its hold on power, not

because of a fine record of performance but more out of a manipulation of the electoral process and the problem of the opposition parties which are not only too weak to challenge its dominance but are neck-deep in the pursuit of narrow pecuniary interests. Thus the apparent multi party system and the seemingly competitive elections are not useful indices of any meaningful democratic consolidation. Put differently, while Nigeria runs a *de jure* multiparty system, given the essential role of these parties not as channels for democratic representation but as tools for personal enrichment, it should not be surprising if the country eventually becomes a *de facto* one-party system in which competitive electoral contests are nothing more than a façade to legitimise the emerging consolidation of power in the hands of a rapacious, authoritarian and visionless ruling class. The return to civilian rule in Nigeria has not brought about any liberation of the country from barracks politics and the flourishing of democratic culture.

### **Conclusions**

The proliferation of political parties cannot be said to have contributed to the deepening of democracy in Nigeria. In fact, it is doubtful that this phenomenon has any democratic value. This is mainly because of the emergence of feckless and weak political parties that have little or no interest in winning elections and therefore in forming government. With the exception of a few political parties, most of Nigeria's political parties in its current democratic experiment are formed for the promotion of the narrow economic interest of their founders and core supporters. This pursuit of narrow personal interests by party leaders has brought about missed opportunities for collaboration by the opposition parties to effectively challenge the hegemonic hold on power by the PDP. In consequence, parties out of power are unable to constitute a countervailing opposition force to the ruling party. The implications of this for governance are dire. Assured of its ability to win its way into power, the ruling party can hardly be said to have done much in the direction of good governance. In consequence, although Nigeria's democracy has endured for about thirteen years, a short but by all means significant period by Nigerian standards, the

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