

The Implications of Party Merger and Lack of Internal Democracy in the Ruling APC for Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Modern democracy works with party politics because democracy involves the active participation of political parties for its sustenance. Therefore, Political parties, as democratic institutions are expected to be the carriers of democratic principles through which democracy can be properly actualized. Hence, a critical analysis of political parties revealed that they are crucial tools for promoting democracy. The quest to wrestle power from the PDP which has ruled Nigeria since the return to democratic rule prompted the then three main opposition parties; ACN, ANNP, CPC, and a faction of APGA to merge and form a mega opposition party called the All Progressives Congress (APC) on February 6, 2013. This paper attempts an analysis of the politics of party merger and lack of internal democracy in the ruling APC and its implications on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. It employed the Heuristic theory of party merger as a framework of analysis while adopting the qualitative research method with reliance on the secondary sources of data. The findings revealed that the inability of the APC National Working Committee and executive branch to harmonize divergent interests of members by allowing a level playing field for all party members resulted to intra-party conflict, fractionalization and defection of some members to other platforms. It concluded that this lack or absence of internal democracy in the APC does not only challenge the credibility of the electoral process but also makes the entire process undemocratic. The paper recommended among other things the entrenchment of internal party democracy within the internal structures and dynamics of the APC particularly in the selection of candidates for elective offices and political positions.

Keywords: Politics, Party merger, Internal Democracy, APC, and Intra-party conflict.

Introduction

Modern democracy works with party politics because democracy involves the active participation of political parties for its sustenance. Therefore, Political parties, as democratic

institutions are expected to be the carriers of democratic principles through which democracy can be properly actualized in Nigeria. Hence, a critical analysis of political parties revealed that they are crucial tools for promoting democracy. The All Progressive Congress (APC) was formed on 6 February 2013 in preparation for the 2015 General Elections. The party is a product of the merger of three major opposition parties-the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), and a faction of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) to form a stronger opposition that will challenge the PDP which had ruled Nigeria for straight sixteen years (Sule& Yahaya, 2019). Dissatisfied members of the PDP (n-PDP) also joined the alliance in 2014. The merger was an outcome of a prolonged attempt to wrestle power from the PDP because the opposition parties realized that it was not possible to defeat the ruling PDP without an alliance formation as each of the opposition party had its stronghold (Sule& Yahaya, 2019). For illustration, the ACN dominated the Southwest, ANPPthe Northeast, CPC and APGA dominated the Northwest and some Southeastern states respectively. The first attempt at merger was made in 2011 between the ACN and CPC which was unsuccessful due to clash of personal interests by the party loyalists, apparently, over who would become its Presidential standard bearer and what name it would be called (Opoola, 2013). However, the consultations were revived in 2012 with the two parties opting for merger where the ACN leaders saw that an ACN/CPC alliance may not be enough to checkmate the PDP and stated that more allies were needed from the East and even the North (Jega, 2013). Therefore, the ANPP was brought into deliberation and later a faction of APGA also joined.

Indications that merger consultations were in the offing arose when opposition party governors met on January 29, 2013 in Lagos where they declared their support for the planned merger. Following the outcome of the meeting, on February 5, 2013, representatives of the merger committee of the parties concerned proclaimed the merger and uncovered the APC name in Abuja (Sule& Yahaya, 2019). In a resolution signed by representatives of the four merging parties, they pledged that "...we the following progressive political parties namely ACN, ANPP,CPC and APGA, have resolved to merge forthwith and become the All Progressives Congress and offer to our beleaguered people a recipe for peace and prosperity" (Obla, 2013, p.1). They further asserted that:

"We resolve to form a political party committed to the principles of internal democracy, focused on serious issues of concern to our people, determined to bring corruption and insecurity to an end, determined to grow our economy and create jobs in their millions through education, housing, agriculture, industrial growth, etc., and stop the increasing mood of despair and hopelessness among our people" (Obla, 2013, p.1).

Internal democracy on the other hand, represents various means of carrying along all party members in internal party decision making and other deliberations (Scarrow, 2004). It is an



all-inclusive top to bottom approach party decision making involving party primaries, representation, accountability and fair ground for all members to be carried on board by the party internally (Okhaide, 2012). Internal democracy means parties have an agreed laid down procedure and principles of mutual decision making and avoidance of conflict or managing it in order to prevent arbitrary decision or imposition of candidates as against the wish of majority members (Sule & Yahaya, 2019). Internal democracy is a way where political parties foster the transparent means of candidate nomination or party primaries, ideological foundations of members and maintenance of discipline and order. Internal democracy expresses the basic principles of democracy within political parties (Jude & Ika, 2013). Internal democracy is predicated on the assumption that transparency, accountability and fair play in terms of equal opportunity should be available and accessible to all party members (Okhaide, 2012, Ojukwu & Olaifa 2011, Liebowitz & Ibrahim, 2013, and Hallberg 2008). It involves parties' selection of candidates, consultation, internal principles of party discipline and sanction, promotion of parties' ideology, accountability (Awofeso et al, 2017). The effects of a lack of internal democracy create anti-party activities, intra-party conflicts, defeat in election and non-adherence to democratic principles (Omilusi, 2016). This paper analyzes the politics of party merger and the implications of lack internal democracy in the ruling APC on democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

In Nigeria, political parties have been characterized by the absence of internal democracy arising from lack of level playing field for all party members leading to intra-party conflict, factionalization and defection of party members to other political parties to realize their ambitions (Egboh & Anichie 2015). The consequence of lack of internal democracy associated with party politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic which started in May 1999 is borne out of the perception that politics is about contestation and struggle for political positions and power between and among the political elites (Momodu & Matudi, 2013). Ojukwu and Olaifa (2011) argued that lack of internal democracy has ensured a lack of transparency and fairness in choosing candidates for elective positions, a development which weakens political parties in Nigeria. Akubo and Yakubu (2014) averred that the absence of internal party democracy is one of the challenges of democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The European Union Election Observation Mission (2015), posited that the zoning of elective political offices among political parties in Nigeria by excluding candidates undermines internal party democracy. Consequently, sustenance of internal democracy, through the process of candidates' selection among political parties in Nigeria, especially in the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) has remained a challenge (Akubo et al, 2014). This is why Egboh and Anichie (2015) submit that internal party democracy is an issue that has consistently eluded Nigerian democracy because political parties have always been hijacked at all levels by powerful individuals who impose loyalists as candidates for election and political positions.

The persistent level of the challenge of internal party democracy in Nigeria 's democratic system is attributable to the belief and perception that politics is the most lucrative industry in the country. This belief is intensified by the growing culture of impunity and blatant disregard for the rule of law exhibited by the Nigerian political elites who see political parties as veritable platforms to capture state power by all means and at all costs. This is because the occupancy of political power gives the political elites the direct access to primitive accumulation of public wealth for their selfish gains which has heightened the desperation for the acquisition of political power among the political elites (Momodu &Matudi, 2013).The persistence challenge of internal party democracy in Nigerian political parties and the attendant intra-party conflict, factionalization and defection of party members, prompted Okoli and Ali (2014) to attribute it to desperate ambitions, lack of ideological attachment to the party system, and materialistic partisan opportunism. Iyare (2004) observes that there is almost nothing to choose between and among Nigerian political parties in terms of ideological leaning and that until poverty of ideology is addressed, the problem of internal party democracy will linger among political parties in Nigeria. Momodu and Matudi (2013), further posited that intra-party conflicts arising from a crisis of internal democracy are a threat to democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Obah-Akpowoghaha (2013) in his study of 'party politics and the challenge of democratic consolidation in Nigeria' argues that lack of internal democracy within political parties is a limiting factor in Nigeria's effort to deepen, sustain and consolidate democracy. Similarly, Ikeanyibe (2014) argues that lack of internal democracy in the nomination of party candidates for general elections does not only weaken party unity and institutionalization, but also negatively affects democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Similarly, Ikechukwu (2015) asserts that the absence of internal party democracy is one of the major factors leading to intra-party conflict, and party defections with a threatening consequence for democratic consolidation. There is one strand of analysis to explain politics of party merger and the implications of lack of internal democracy in the ruling APC on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. This strand of analysis is the formation of APC as a merger of three (3) main opposition parties; ACN, ANPP, CPC and a faction of APGA, and also the dissatisfied members of People's Democratic Party (n-PDP) which later join the mega party in 2014. This merger was a marriage of strange bedfellows with divergent political ideologies and interests, which is attributable to the quest to wrestle power from the then ruling PDP, so as to make certain decisions to the benefit of the members. Therefore, it is based on this observed problem that this paper attempts to explain how the formation of APC as a merger of different political parties with diverse political ideologies, goals and interests induce intra-party conflict and in turn affect democratic consolidation in the country.

Literature Review

Extant literatures abound on the study of party merger and democratic consolidation. Scholars such as Coffe and Tronvelied (2008), Marland and Flanagan (2013), Obah-Akpowoghana (2013), and Buba (2017), have written extensively on party merger and

democratic consolidation. Others scholars include, Hamel and Janda (1994), Nwankwo (2015), Obla (2013), Jude and Ika (2013), Toyin (2014), Awofesu and Irabor (2016) among others. For instance, Coffe and Tronvelied (2008) identified contextual, inter-party relations and intra-party relations as explanatory factors for the merger of political parties. However, Coffe and Tronvelied did not see party merger as effort to evolve two major political parties. Hamel and Janda (1994), studied the integral theory of party goals and party change as their explanatory factor for party merger. Marland and Flanagan (2013), on their part, look at party merger as a step on the road to power. But Marland and Flaganan (2013) failed to envisage that party merger is also a step to strong opposition party that could provide constructive criticism of the party in government. While Obla (2015) in his study of party merger, argues that party merger of opposition parties is imperatives because it provides for representative and responsive governance. For him, merger of political parties could also serve as a strong opposition to the party in government.

Nwankwo (2015), in his work titled, ‘politics of merger of political parties in Nigeria: the past and present efforts’, posited that merger of political parties is an effort to evolving a two-party system. Nwankwo (2015), did not view party merger as necessary as a step on the road to power. Buba (2017), in his study of party merger and democratic consolidation, submits that merger of political parties provides credible, vibrant, strong and challenging opposition that is essential for democratic consolidation. To him, a strong and vibrant opposition party provides for effective and representative governance. Nevertheless, Buba (2017) did not see merger of political parties as an interplay of contextual, inter-party and intra-party factors. From the review of the existent literature on politics of party merger and the implications of lack of internal party democracy on democratic consolidation, it is obvious that scholars did not link the composition of political party as a merger of parties with different political ideologies that pursue incompatible goals and interests, to non-adherence to internal democracy. The composition of APC as a mega party and the failure of the party leadership to allow level playing ground for all members in terms of selection of candidate for both elective and appointive political positions has not only induced intra-party conflict in the APC leading to factionalization and defection of party members to other political parties, but has also undermined democratic consolidation.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs the Heuristic Theory of party merger as its theoretical framework in explaining politics of party Merger and lack of internal democracy in the ruling APC. The theory was propounded by Coffé and Tronvelied of Utrecht University, Netherlands in 2008 (Coffé&Torenvlied cited in Buba, 2017). Coffé and Tronvelied(2008), influenced by general theories of party change, developed the Heuristic Theory of party merger as a first attempt to fill the gap in study on party mergers as a specific type of party change to describe the numerous interconnected factors that explain party mergers. Consequently, the theory identified three (3) different types of factors that may act as substances for parties to merge. These factors identified by the Heuristic theory of party merger include: contextual factors such as non-party specific

problems that prompted parties' merger; intra-party factors such as factors that drive dynamics within party; and inter-party factors such as factors between possible merging parties that drive collaboration between possible merging factors (Coffe & Tronvelied, 2008 cited in Buba, 2017). Proponents of this theory argued that party merger is the consequence of a multidimensional interaction between the aforementioned three types or levels of factors. Marland and Flanagan (2013), in their study of the creation of the Conservative Party of Canada, posited that party mergers pass via several stages and are shaped by a number of progressive factors such as dialogue about aligning forces which develop as the parties experience shocks and failures; when the leadership gradually becomes frustrated and with each discontent a rising number of elites feel that uniting forces are essential to improve their electoral prospects; and lastly, a tentative agreement between party executives is reached, and the formal authorization and execution process is followed.

From the foregoing analysis, it could be justified that the Heuristic theory adequately explained the factors that drive the decision of the three (3) Nigerian major opposition parties: ACN, ANPP, CPC, and a faction of APGA to merge and formed the All Progressive Congress (APC) in 2013. This is because, as the heuristic theory would want to make us believe, contextual factor especially the PDP dominance since the return to democratic rule in 1999, informed the decision of the APC merger. In fact, the former PDP chairman, Prince Vincent Ogbulafor, basking in the euphoria of the party's victory at the 2007 General Elections, declared that the PDP would rule Nigeria for the next Sixty (60) years. This was seen by many political analysts as a march towards the dark alley of a one-party system. Similarly, on inter-party relations posited by heuristic theorists as factor that informed party merger, the three (3) merged political parties (ACN, ANPP & CPC), were the strong and main opposition parties in Nigeria that worked in concert to offer constructive criticism of the PDP-led government. Apart from these three (3) parties, all other opposition parties were friable entities that operated essentially as office-seeking rather than vote-seeking parties.

Implications of Lack of Internal Democracy in the All Progressive Congress (APC) on Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

In Nigeria, party politics is hampered by a lack of internal party democracy and the absence of credible elections leading to intra-party and inter-party conflicts, anti-party activities, factionalization, decamping, cross-carpeting, and defection of party members. Although, intra-party conflict in Nigerian body politics predates the country's independence, however, it is intensified in the Fourth Republic which started from 1999 to date. The ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) like the PDP has suffered and still suffers intra-party conflict leading to factionalization and defection of party members as a result of the APC party aversion to internal democracy, authoritarian leadership, disregard to democratic tenets, disregard to rule of law, lack of party supremacy, party impunity, lack of party institutionalization, flouting of party constitution by party leaders and members, and politics of exclusion at the federal, state and local levels (Oladesu, 2017). Consequently, the APC as the Nigerian ruling political party which is supposed to promote peaceful competition necessary for democratic rule, a principle which presumes the legitimacy, autonomy, party supremacy, the right to challenge the incumbents, the existence of internal party democracy and a consolidated party system which make it needful for party members to articulate their common or harmonize their divergent interests is relegated to the background (Aniche, 2017).

The APC fallouts of internal democracy manifested in the imposition of party executive committees, imposition and substitution of candidates. Lack of internal party democracy is sustained through the incumbency factor in circumstances where a sitting executive is given an automatic ticket in the name of a consensus candidate (Aniche, 2017). For instance, the APC produced President Muhammadu Buhari as its sole Presidential candidate for the 2019 General Elections. Lack of internal party democracy also prevented the ruling APC from conducting credible primary elections between 2014 and 2019 which breeds intra-party conflict leading to factionalization and defection of party members. For instance, in February 2015, five (5) APC members of the House of Representatives and two of the APC founding members- Alhaji Ibrahim Shekarau, former governor of Kano state and Alhaji Attahiru Bafarawa, former governor of Sokoto State with their supporters defected to the PDP (Thurston, 2015). In June 2015, few days to the inauguration of the 8th National Assembly, the APC in total disregard to democratic principles, organized a sham mock internal party election and nominated Senator Ahmed Lawan of the defunct ANPP from Yobe State and Femi Gbajabamila of the defunct ACN from Lagos State as the party preferred candidates for Senate President and Speaker House of Representatives respectively. The APC failure to adhere to democratic principles by allowing level playing field for every interested APC Senators and APC members of House of Representatives to contest the positions led to the emergence of Senator Bukola Saraki and Yakubu Dogara as the Senate President and Speaker House of Representatives respectively against all odds (Aniche, 2017). The emergence of Saraki and Dogara as the Senate President and Speaker House of Representatives respectively against the wish of the APC National

Working Committee and presidency, led to executive-legislative crises which in turn affected national administration (Sule& Yahaya, 2019).

Again, in 2018, the implications of lack of internal democracy in the ruling APC by not allowing level playing field for all members regardless of party affiliation to contest resulted in its intra-party conflict which led to factionalization and later defection of party members to the PDP and other political parties (Sule& Yahaya, 2019). This scenario, did not only destabilize the APC in preparation to the 2019 General Elections but also forced the party to embark on the politics of witch-hunting and re-alignment which in turn affect democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Similarly, in 2019, the lack of internal democracy in the APC arising from the conduct of the party's primaries led to the exclusion of APC candidates from contesting all elective positions in Rivers and Zamfara States by the Supreme Court judgment led by the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Justice Ibrahim Mohammed Tanko who argues that the party failed to conduct valid primaries from which its candidates emerged (Sahara Reporters, 2019).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The crisis of internal party democracy connected with party politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic which started in May 1999 is borne out of the perception that party politics is about the struggle for political power between and among the political elites. This paper argues that the authoritarian character of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) in terms of non-adherence to democratic principles, deepens crisis of internal democracy and affects democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Consequently, the lack of internal democracy in Nigerian political parties especially in the ruling APC does not only undermine the credibility of the electoral process but also make the entire process undemocratic. The authoritarian character of the ruling APC in the form of aversion to internal party democracy, dictatorial leadership, neglect of democratic principles, disregard to rule of law, lack of party supremacy, party impunity, lack of party institutionalization, flouting of party constitution and politics of exclusion which led to intra-party conflict, factionalization, and defection of party members is a reflection of the authoritarian character of the Nigerian state and the political elites. Consequently, this lack of internal party democracy in the ruling APC does not only undermine the credibility of the electoral process but also makes the entire process undemocratic.

Recommendations

From the foregoing analysis and conclusion, this paper recommends that:

- i. Inclusive decisions and transparent party activities should be effectively promoted.
- ii. The APC must go back to the drawing board and establish some rules governing intra-party relationship and conduct of party members

- iii. There should be punishment or sanction for any member or members who flout party constitution
- iv. Conduct of party primaries should be free and fair so as to field credible candidates
- v. Members of the APC should subordinate themselves to the party constitution
- vi. To limit unhealthy and intra-party conflict, the APC must provide a level playing field for all its members to contest for any position or seek party nomination for any public office
- vii. The APC must ensure the entrenchment of internal democracy within the party structure and workings especially in the selection and nomination of candidates in the party and for the general elections. This, in turn, will democratize the degree of its internal organizational development, to the level at which supporters will view it as a significant factor which would guarantee internal democracy in the APC.

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