Contributions of Party System to Democratic Development in Africa

A Historical Perspective

AMEEN A. ABDULKADIR (iD)

Department of Politics and Governance
Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria
ameeniyi@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper examined the contributions of party system to democratic development in Africa. Democratic governance and meaningful elections have long been considered unachievable in the absence of political parties and party competition. This is because party system institutionalization is important for the consolidation of democracy. Democracy instead of being the bedrock of good governance stayed on as an unfulfilled promise because the method of power acquisition remained basically authoritarian and functioned on the basis of a hierarchy of networks and alliances with local tribe, ethnic group or through top-down utter sovereignty of institutions that choke the grassroots politicization of society which had been the moral fibre of the process of democratization. To this end, it was discovered that the relationship between political parties, electoral volatility and democracy in Africa cannot be addressed unconnectedly. The paper therefore recommends that; assumptions about the trajectory and outcomes of democratic development in Africa need to be more effectively investigated on the basis of empirically informed analysis of operationalized politics in these systems. It is important to bear in mind that most of the electoral systems, laws, institutions and constitutions that govern elections in Africa were inherited from colonialism. Electoral politics came as a proposed solution to other socio-economic and political problems. This therefore calls for an amendment to these electoral processes in order to mirror the present realities in Africa as well as adhere to best practice as it is in developed democracies. It is contended that if an electoral system is to append value to democracy, it must promote the accountability of the elected representatives to their constituencies which could be furnished through strong political parties. The paper relied on secondary data using descriptive analytical method.

Keywords: Political Party, Election in Africa, Democracy and Development, Historical perspective.

Introduction

In Africa, the foundation for competitive multiparty politics was difficult to stretch out before 1990 as only four countries in sub-saharan Africa could be truly described as competitive electoral democracies. These are Botswana, Gambia, Senegal and Mauritius. Between 1990 and 1995, thirty eight out of forty seven countries in sub-saharan Africa held legislative elections and by 1994, not a single de-jure one party state remained in Africa (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997: 8). Even where the democratic try-out was successfully sustained, a single party, often the former ruling party in the one-party period tends to maintain an overriding share of power within the system by controlling of the executive or legislative majorities or both.

Modestly, democracy can be defined as a form of political system in which citizens choose in competitive elections, the occupants of top political offices of the state (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997:3). This choice of candidate by citizens is usually enabled by political parties. Though, the most impending challenge posed on the survival of democracy in many African countries lies in the predominant characteristics of the parties and emerging party systems. As Katz (1980: 11) noted;

modern democracy is party democracy; the political institutions and practices that are the essence of democratic government in the western view were the creation of political parties and democracy would be unthinkable without them. Since the structuring of elections from citizen participation to candidate selection, the choice and staging of competing political programmes are done first and foremost by political parties, hence, the growth of effective parties and party systems will inevitably form a major part of the foundation of the new government.

Unlike Africa, emerging democracies in the west have core democratic processes and institutions which are shaped by political parties. It is thus imperative for Africa as well to come up with strategies to manage political parties with a view to achieving good governance and progressive democracy (Huntington, 1970, Zolberg, 1966). Laconically, the argument of this section, is that party system in many African countries are built on a somewhat different foundation compared to the one that undergirds both advanced industrial democracies and the theories of party system that generated from their experiences. The diverse nature of most African countries in the typical sense has contributed to the challenges of state-building, thus, the condition under which electoral politics became known and the preponderance of direct interference of African leaders in the political-economy of the state has far reaching effect on the socio-political landscape.

For election to be productive and achieve its primary goal of transmitting power by means of legitimacy, certain institutions must be in place. These institutions must possess certain qualities; competence, legal prerogative and impartiality (Pastor, 1999:75). The Electoral Commission, Judiciary, Security Architecture and Civil Society are primary institutions that are relevant in the conduct of election. Most important of all these institutions is the electoral commission, which is the institution that is charged with the responsibility of preparing and conducting elections.

As observed by (Innocent et al, 2018), institutions such as the electoral commission ought to be independent, competent and fair to all the candidates and parties participating in the electoral process. In achieving this, the electoral commission will also be expected to possess legal prerogative, ability to deploy its resources to handle election-related complaints in an unbiased manner and effectively address irregularities. It is on this basis that the electoral commission can build and earn the confidence of the electorate as well as political parties which is fundamental to arriving at a credible electoral process.

However, in Africa's fragile democracies, electoral institutions are usually low-immuned to political pressure and control of political forces, especially the ruling party which often has special interest in the outcome of elections. This is evident in Zimbabwe, Niger, Cameroon and Kenya where the electoral commission was for long controlled by the leadership of the ruling political party oligarchs (Nyamwamu 2008:4). In fact, Nyamwanu observed that during the 2007 Kenyan election, the electoral commission found itself totally impotent to resolve electoral disputes and critical questions raised on the credibility of the general election.

The argument presented in this work is not to portray Africa as a continent that cannot operate effective electoral system or stage credible elections. Even though there were instances of flaws in the conduct of election administration in some African countries, there exist a number of countries on the continent that their democracies can lay claim to effective electoral system through relatively competitive two parties and multiparty election. Examples include; Benin and Zambia in 1991, Mali and Nigeria in 1992, South Africa and Malawi in 1994, Ghana and Senegal in 2000, Kenya in 2002 and Egypt in 2018. For democracy to be strongly rooted in Africa, therefore, there is need for careful enthronement of the most efficient electoral system that is potent in ensuring systematic conduct of free, fair and credible elections.

Brief note on party politics in Africa

The oldest political institution in sub-saharan Africa is political party, it represents the time when politics came and remained the key instrument for the subjugation of the traditional political kingdoms. It was used as opposition to colonial rule and the podium for attainment of independence. At this time, the leadership of political parties were represented by a mixture of new and old elites with different local, regional and ethnic identity as it appeared in the names and slogans of congresses and national councils.

With independence on board, the different nationalist parties from the centre to the local levels swiftly turned to single party rule. Political parties were able to detonate the inheritance of colonial rules and policies through de jure or de facto system. Single party system appeared to be the only proficient order to articulate and aggregate citizens' interests and demands towards what were the new independent nation- state developmental goals (Hodgkin, 1961). The single party system was accepted and justified as the best option by the international community and by academia, since the priority was the political order against the risk of its orderly mobilization of grievances (Garber and Bjornlund, 1992). After independence, democracy in most African countries remained an unfulfilled promise because the mode of power remained basically authoritarian that works on hierarchy of networks and alliances with local tribal, ethnic constituencies or through top-down absolute sovereignty of institutions which helped to suffocate precisely the grassroots politicization of society which was the backbone of the process of national liberation. What complicated the situation were the structural deficiencies of the African states and the hostile international environment, as the cold war made Africa one of its experimental battle field.

The military coup d'état that usurps most African countries after independence was another hindrance to effectiveness of political parties. From the first decade of independence it was obvious that the fall in government's popularity was not containable, as various forms of social and political struggles hijacked the system. By the end of that decade, most of the African countries strangled by various political, economic and environmental crisis had no other choice than to bargain from a position of weakness and structural adjustment programmes motivated by the primacy of market over state led growth (Gentili 2005:5).

In the 1980's the age of structural adjustment was opened while the 90s could be described as the decade of the return to democracy. With the end of the Cold war at the beginning of the '90s, it was manifest that economic liberalization needs to be promoted and reformed by democratization processes, this were done along with the building of institutions that enable good governance, rule of law and capacity building. In the political realm the twin solution was the promotion of democracy intended as pluralism through multiparty elections. The adoption of rule of law, promotion of civil society, democratization were resisted in most countries by single- party leaders but embraced by majority of the population in another wave of revolution of rising expectations. According to Adejumobi (2000: 61-63), between 1990 and 1994, the first multiparty elections were held in 29 countries. From 1985 to 1989 just nine countries had multiparty suffrages but between 1990 and 1998 seventy legislative and sixty presidential elections in 42 countries were held. Between 1998 and 2001 there were 55 elections and 8 referenda. Hence, electoral laws, the redrafting of constitutions and elections became a podium of confrontation (Gentili 2005 : 5).

Functions of Political Party in Africa

Huntington's Political Order in Changing Societies (1968) provides what is at hand, the classic statement on the significance of parties for orderly political modernization and development and it remains one of the useful starting points for understanding the likely role of parties in constructing

democratic regimes. According to Huntington, strong political institutions, including parties are essential for controlling and coordinating the heightened political mobilization that occurs with the advent of socio-economic progress. With the clamour for incorporation into the political arena by newly mobilized social groups, an organizational vacuum is created which must be filled by intermediary organization if the system is to remain stable. As the society records progress in modernization, the need to organize political participation also increases. The longer the organizational vacuum is maintained, the more explorative it becomes. (Huntington, 1968: 406).

Parties, according to Huntington, perform vital functions in terms of ordering the political system. They are instrumental to enthronement of order and stability in the society, serve to structure the political process and make sure that citizen participation in that process is orderly. They create new foundation for solidarity and identity within society, and try to reduce pre-existing cleavage lines such as clan, ethnicity or religion. Parties also seek to provide a distinctive collective identity for their followers, one that is grounded upon acceptance of the basic rules of the national political arena. Parties also provide order to the political process, this is done by moderating the procedure for leadership succession and for the integration of new groups into the political system (Basedau and Stroh, 2008: 68, Huntington, 1968: 405, Mesfin, 2008: 6).

For Huntington and most other contemporary scholars, most times general politics was impossible without political parties. Huntington perceives 18th century hostility to political parties as divisive:

> The evils attributed to party are in reality, the attributes of a disorganized and fragmented politics of clique and faction which prevails when parties are non-existent or still very weak. Their cure lies in political organization; and in a modernizing state, political organization means party organization (Huntington, 1968: 405).

Parties build unity out of disparate and potentially dangerous social forces. Parties are the leading instrument of social organization and control, whether they are ruling parties in a single-party regime or opposition parties in a multi party system. Both developing and advanced industrial nations have experienced this fact.

It is important to note therefore, that modernization theory rests on the assumption that parties will develop in response to similar spurs in every country, basically in socio-economic development. In the West, parties were the bye-products of the industrial revolution as well as social and political mobilization. The energy drives from the bottom up, party organizations are used for aggregating and transmitting societal demands.

As noted above, parties that are evolving in today's late democracies in Africa countries came up out of a very different context and function very differently. Today's newly emerging parties have arisen largely in response to political, rather than socio-economic change, they have emerged suddenly and are not naturally linked to any organized social group and so have often devised mobilizing people along issues like ethnicity and opposition to structural economic reform without regard for the long-term consequences. Though, these parties engage in competition, but often in undesirable manner. In many African countries, political parties are at the mercy of opposition elites as they use the parties to mobilize, aggregate and disaggregate various kinds of social forces. Thus, while the forms of politics have changed significantly, the underlying logic of politics as an elite-driven enterprise with the right to take charge of state's assets is the only prize that matters (Manning, 2005: 718).

Party Politics and Democracy in Africa

It is important to examine the circumstances under which parties are able to carry out their functions. Diamond (1997: 23) while analysing democratic consolidation in the third-wave democracies noted that political parties remain important if not essential instruments for representing political constituencies and interests, aggregating demands and preferences, recruiting and socializing new candidates for office, organizing competitive election for power, crafting policy alternatives, setting the policy-making agenda, forming effective government and integrating groups and individuals into the democratic process.

In the comparative literature, parties are expected to enable political inclusion in several ways. First, they are responsible for the political socialization of social groups aspiring to participate in the new political system. Second, they provide a unique collective identity through which members can be integrated into the political system. And third, they collate and channel constituents' demands through the political system in such a way that the system can respond to them (Mesfin, 2008, Nohlen, Michael and Bernhard, 1999).

To perform these functions, Diamond believes that, parties should have strong linkage with different social strata, offer distinctive platforms which appeal to a core set of voters and distinguish them clearly from other parties and be able to attract and retain party activists and potential leaders. Huntington (1968: 408-409) asserted that; a party should be strong to the extent that it can institutionalize mass support and that a key index of party strength is organizational complexity and depth, particularly as revealed by the linkages between the party and social- economic groups such as labour unions and peasant associations. In advanced industrial democracies, it is expected that parties will use control of offices to enthrone effective public policy while emerging democracies focus on parties' ability to deliver on promises to both voters and activists, and to win or control considerable share of government power either in the legislature or control of executive positions. Redistribution of resources is also a function of political parties in African democracies, but they often lay less emphasis on policies that will affect growth and the distribution of income in the private sector (Manning, 2005: 720).

Consequently, in many African countries, parties have few or no resources to sustain themselves between elections, given the limitation of private sectors and the uncertainties of the political future. Weaknesses in political parties and gaps in knowledge and understanding of political parties in developing contexts are magnified when it comes to party systems (Diamond, 1997).

This hypothesis rests clearly on certain assumptions about the nature of the parties that constitute the party system likewise the context in which the party system operates within a particular institutional framework and the strength of institutions. It is important to note therefore, that party systems may become institutionalized, accepted by all relevant political actors and fundamental rules of political interaction without meeting any of these positive purposes for democratic governance. For instance, in Mozambique, the leading opposition party, Renamo, limited the functioning of formal institutions, including elections and parliament, in favour of informal negotiations between its own leadership and the government (Shitu and Abdulkadir-imam, 2018). Also, President Moi in Kenya and activists in his ruling KANU party were alleged to have incited violence against seeming supporters of opposition parties in the Rift Valley and in coastal areas before and after the country's first two multiparty general elections in 1992 and 1996. The ruling party sought to use this politically motivated violence as inter-ethnic warfare brought on by the tensions of electoral competition. (Manning, 2002:17, Wood and Ilaines, 1998: 107-108). African party systems seem to obscure the best guess about the number of parties and the implications for party system performance and outcome of political competition. While the aggregate number of

parties is high, the number of relevant parties is relatively low. Fragmentation is another common indicator of a party system's prospect for consolidation. Fragmented party system with high level of ideological distance between parties tends toward polarized pluralism (Sartori, 1976). Most African countries have settled for presidential system with extremely weak legislatures, the real treasure in such system is executive power and there is little motivation for parties to form electoral coalitions that might prevent their own leaders from occupying top positions even if they tend to lose out in terms of legislative seats (Manning, 2005: 723). Also, the problem of fragmentation has little to do with whether or not the electoral system heartens the proliferation of parties or the existence of ideological differences. Instead, it ends up in executive dominance. It is therefore arguable that, an institutionalized party system could be seen as a helper to democratic governability and legitimacy by facilitating legislative support for government policies; coordinating demands and conflict of interests through established procedures; and rendering the democratic process more inclusive, accessible and effective (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997: 120).

Another basis of complicatedness is the collective action problem arising from the strength of the ruling party, which holds the major hub of economic as well as political power. Parties in Africa often lack plain identities and articulate organization, but they habitually have strong linkage with social groups and enjoy surplus autonomy from their base. Even though, their bases of electoral support are highly robust, volatility and fragmentation among party system development and stability are clearly not adequate measures of anything in the African context (Manning, 2005: 723). Most African rulers made insincere promise and concession aimed at buying time with no clear intention of implementing elections or surrendering power to the other party.

Conclusion

The paper having studied the effect of party systems in Africa democratic experiment advises that, assumptions about the route and outcomes of democratic development in Africa need to be more effectively probed on the basis of empirically informed analysis of operationalized politics within the African political sphere. It is worthy to note that, most of the electoral systems, laws, institutions and constitutions that govern elections in Africa were inherited from the colonial system, hence, electoral politics came not as the conclusion of processes of socio-economic change and social pluralism but rather as a projected solution to other problems, particularly economic mismanagement and/or violent conflict. This situation therefore canvasses for an amendment to these electoral processes in order to reflect the present realities in Africa as well as adhere to best practice as it is in developed democracies. It has been debated that if an electoral system is to add value to democracy, it must promote the accountability of the elected representatives to their constituencies which could be furnished through strong political parties whilst at the same time ensure broader representation of key political forces. In this way, a political system becomes more inclusive, accountable, and participatory as it accords the rulers legitimacy to govern.

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