

Nigerian Political Parties, the National Question and the Scorecard of Discontinuities

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Abstract

President Goodluck Jonathan inaugurated the National Conference of 2014 in Nigeria, in search of answers to the national question. During his campaigns for reelection in 2015, Dr Jonathan continued to highlight that as soon as he was reelected, the National Conference positions would be provided with constitutional imprint of authority. Jonathan's Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was however defeated in the Presidential Election by the All Progressives Congress (APC). This study thus became interested in the implications of this defeat (and victory) on the role of Nigerian political parties, in attempting to answer the enduring national question in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria; Political parties; National question; Scorecard; Discontinuities

I. Introduction

A fundamental ambience of the history of Nigeria critically depicts the Nigerian narrative as a saga of the national question. Hence, Offiong (1995), cited in Ajagun and Odion (2010:353) asserts that the national question has been a major issue, before and after independence in Nigeria. Also, citing inter alia, Agbodike (1998) and Kurfi (1998), Bello (2012:3) argues:

The problem of acrimonious existence among the diverse groups and interests in the federation of Nigeria leading to mutual distrust, suspicion and inter-communal conflicts has become perennial and endemic in the nation's body politic and has militated against the political stability of the country since independence. The fear of domination of one ethnic group or section of the country by another and the national question of who gets what, and how the national cake should be shared, constitute major factors of this problem. As a result of mutual suspicion existing among the various social groups, whatever the issue at hand in Nigeria, the patterns of reaction to it will be determined by geo-political as well as religious considerations. This situation seriously hampers efforts at national unity as it applies to the building of a united Nigeria out of the disparate ethnic, geographic, social, economic and religious elements or groups in the country.

The final draft of the National Conference Report, 2014 has again graphically chronicled the tendencies and trajectories of the national question in Nigeria. This research is being conducted at the dying minute of the government of Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, who inaugurated the National Conference and during his campaigns for reelection in 2015, continued to highlight that as soon as he was reelected, the national conference positions, would be provided with constitutional imprint of authority. Dr Jonathan's Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was defeated in the Presidential Election.

The All Progressives Congress (APC) is taking over. What is the implication of this defeat and victory on the role of Nigerian political parties, in attempting to provide answers to the national question? What does the victory of the APC portend for the response of Nigerian political parties to the national question? Essentially, this study revolves around these questions.

II. Nigerian Politics Parties: A Historical Account

The first political party in Nigeria, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) emerged in 1923, under the leadership of Herbert Macaulay. Its activities were restricted to contesting elections into the Lagos city council and for years, the UNDP was hegemonic in its dominance in electoral politics in the country. This was to be challenged by the Lagos Youth Movement - latter Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), formed in 1934 which defeated the NNDP for the three seats allocated to Lagos that year. By 1944, the increasing tempo of nationalist agitation had resulted in the formation of another political party, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), under the leadership of Herbert Macaulay and later Nnamdi Azikwe. This was followed, in quick succession, by the transformation of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, a Yoruba socio-cultural organization, into a political party, the Action Group (AG), in 1950 under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the Northern People Congress (NPC) in 1959, with dominance in the Northern region (Omotala 2009). Citing further, Dudley (1973) and Osaghae (1998), Omotala (2009:620) continues:

By 1951, a breakaway faction of the NPC consisting mainly of radical youths based in Kano formed the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU). These parties dominated the political landscape of the country, particularly in their respective regions in the march towards independence and in the First Republic. Although the Second Republic (1979-1983) witnessed the emergence of more political parties, there was no much difference with what obtained under the First Republic. Rather, what happened was the reincarnation of parties of the First Republic, under different nomenclatures, with some additional parties. The parties included the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP), replacing the NPC, AG and NCNC, respectively. Others were the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) and Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP), and later Nigerian Advance Party (NAP), which was registered in 1982, after failing the first round in 1978. These parties constituted major actors in the Second Republic.

While also citing inter alia, Oyediran and Agbaje (1991), Simbine (2005); and Onu and Momoh, (2005), Omotala (2009:621) highlights:

Under the aborted Third Republic, there was a fundamental change in the mode of party formation in Nigeria. This pertains to the official formation of parties by the state after a series of experiments with different political associations. The parties were the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC), the former being a little to the left and the latter a little to the right. This development, executed after the dissolution of the thirteen associations that applied for registration, has been part of the grand design to execute a "hidden agenda", to perpetuate the military regime in power. The eventual annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election by the military regime of General Babangida lends some credence to this claim. The country once again returned to multi-party democracy in 1999 following the transition inaugurated and successfully completed by General Abdulsalm Abubakar. Initially, three political parties, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP), later All Nigerian People Party (ANPP), and the Alliance for Democracy (AD) were registered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

By December 2002, the number of registered parties rose to thirty (30), while additional three political parties were registered in January/February 2006.

According to another account, the Fourth Republic was initiated through the 1999 Constitution. For its first elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) recognized only three political parties: the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP) and the Action for Democracy (AD). Following a Supreme Court judgment on the case, Balarabe Musa v INEC, conditions for registration of political parties were liberalized. Subsequently, Nigeria's political space witnessed an unprecedented opening with the emergence of 63 registered political parties by April 2011. Prominent among the new parties were the Action

Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Political Change (CPC) and the People's Progressive Alliance (PPA). In addition, many small parties took advantage of the liberalization of the political space to register parties that have proven to be unviable, but meant to be vehicles through which INEC's funding support to parties could be cornered. In order to promote credible elections with the existence of strong political parties, section 78(6) of the 2010 Electoral Act provided INEC with the power to de-register any political parties that failed to win any executive and legislative seats in elections (Liebowitz & Ibrahim 2013:15).

Only ten parties won seats in the 2011 elections. On 18th August 2011, INEC de-registered seven parties that did not contest for any election office in the 2011 elections. They were the Democratic Alternative, National Action Council, National Democratic Liberal Party, Masses Movement of Nigeria, Nigeria People's Congress, Nigeria Elements Progressive Party and the National Unity Party. INEC also announced its intention to de-register more parties as soon as the numerous court cases by some of the parties were determined. At the end of 2012, an additional 31 political parties were de-registered, leaving only 27 registered political parties (Liebowitz & Ibrahim 2013:15). There were only 26 of these parties in existence for the 2015 general elections (Tukur 2014, Kumolu 2015). One of the former 27 parties must have fallen by the wayside.

III. The National Question: A Conceptual Elucidation

Citing Toyo (1993) and Anyanwu (1993), Ajagun and Odion (2010:352), explain that the national question can be viewed from two dimensions. The first dimension on the national question is concerned with how the political union of diverse ethnic groups or nations or peoples who are conscious of their diversities should be ordered and run. Also, it is about whether relations among the diverse groups should be geared towards integrating the groups into a single nation or granting self-determination to them. It normally arises when groups within the political union (the state) seek advantages over others, try to dominate others or seek for measures of independence or self determination. Thus, in broad terms, the national question is all about trying to resolve or remove the tensions and contradictions that often arise from such inter-ethnic relations and which manifest in form of fear of marginalization, domination, inequality, unfairness and injustice in inter ethnic group relations.

Citing Ntalaja (1987) in continuation, Ajagun and Odion (2010:352), posit that the second dimension on the national question is the class relations dimension. Here, the focus is on tensions and contradictions that arise from class inequalities and antagonisms between the rich and the poor in the society. This is centered on similar issues of how to remove the fear of perpetual marginalization, domination, inequality, unfairness and injustice in poor and rich class relations.

Commonly however, Ajagun and Odion (2010:352) further adds that the second dimension of the national question is interwoven with, and indeed overshadowed by that of inter-ethnic group dimension. In this study, the concept of national question is invariably in tandem with the ethnic group dimension.

IV. The Scorecard of Discontinuities

According to Sklar (1983), in the movement for Nigerian national independence, political parties led the way. Their origins lay in a multitude of associations that were devoted to community improvement, political reform, and racial liberation. Hence, at the time of independence in 1960, four political parties were firmly established on a broad territorial basis. These parties were the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Action Group of Nigeria, the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) and the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU). From 1951 to 1962, three of these parties-NPC in the North, NCNC, in the East, and the Action Group in the West-controlled governmental regions. Given the presence of a predominant linguistic group in each region-Hausa in the North, Igbo in the East, and Yoruba in the West-the major political

parties were commonly identified with “ethnic” group interests in a misleading manner. Thus, it usually appears as if the pre-independence Nigerian political parties were all originally formed to promote ethnic or religious and divisive agenda (see Azeez 2009; Oladiran, 2013). However, Sklar (1983: xiii) further notes:

In Northern Nigeria, the NPC endeavoured to reconcile traditional authority in all parts of that culturally diverse region, with the requirements of modern government; rooted in the Muslim emirates, the party was never intended to promote a specifically ethnic interest. NPC policies were generally true to the nonsectarian precept of the party’s regionalist motto: “One North: One People, Irrespective of Religion, Rank or Tribe”. Sklar (1983: xiii) therefore highlights that the motto of NPC, was actually less belligerent than its usual presentation in extant literature. The motto of the NPC was never: One North, One Religion, and One Tribe. Ojukwu and Olaifa (2011:29), asserts that the NPC was a party with the philosophy of ‘One North, One Destiny and One God’. There is however, a remarkable difference between these two portrayals of the Weltanschauung of the NPC.

But if we specifically go by the position of Sklar (1983), the benefit of the doubt must be accorded to the founder members of the NPC that they did not set out to be tribal warlords and religious jingoists. Nnoli (1978:157) affirms that when the NPC was founded, the emphasis was on the region rather than any ethnic group. It was accordingly formed for Northerners, by Northerners and for the pursuit of objectives limited to the North and Northerners. And indeed, this scenario, succinctly expresses a tendency towards regionalization, as different from ethnicization. This is instructive because within the North, there were the other ethnic groups that the party policy did not exclude. Similarly in the case of the NCNC and the AG, Sklar (1983: xiii) further posits:

In Eastern Nigeria and the adjacent Midwest (which acquired regional status in 1963), the NCNC rarely lost an election in the Igbo-speaking constituencies. Yet this party was also supported by a decisive majority of the preponderant, Edo-speaking, linguistic group of the Midwest. Furthermore, the NCNC retained sizeable pockets of electoral and parliamentary strength in the Yoruba-speaking Western Region until 1964. Similarly, the Action Group, rooted in its Yoruba origins, emerged in 1956 as the foremost party of “minority” group interests in the Eastern and Northern Regions.

Thereafter, it could be argued, the party’s commitment to “home rule” for all ethnic and linguistic groups superseded its earlier particularistic orientation.

The NCNC in particular was therefore never initially founded for the promotion of Igbo interests. The NCNC as a party certainly had cosmopolitan viewpoints at this period. In the specific case of the Action Group, it must be pointed out that when the party finally emerged as a group that was inspired by, founded on, and nourished by ethnic chauvinism and regional parochialism (Nnoli 1978:155) the genesis of this tendency must appropriately be ascribed to a certain phobia of the increasingly rising political profile of the nationally influential Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe of Igbo origin, by the emergent leaders of Yoruba nationalism. Hence, the fear of Azikiwe as a person was a major impetus to the politicization of ethnicity by the new power bloc in Yorubaland. The original impulsion was not out of a morbid dislike of the Igbos as a collectivity. As a matter of fact, Nnoli (1978:161) specifically posits that the ethnic and regional origin of the AG arose from the failure of Yoruba nationalists like Chiefs Obafemi Awolowo and Bode Thomas to break the fiery political hold of Dr Azikiwe on Lagos (which was officially and politically part of the Western Region) and the inability of these leaders to carve out a national following for themselves.

In the process of the foregoing, the war-mongering tendencies of the individual political leaders became intertwined with the assumed political party positions. Consequently, according to Nnoli (1978:158) by 1953, the major political parties in the country, the NCN, AG and NPC had become associated with the three major ethnic groups; Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, and the three regions of the country; East, West and North respectively.

The parties became associated with the ethnic groups and regions, not that the ethnic groups or regions founded the parties. The political parties of the First Republic therefore were not principally ethnic political entities that merely escalated the problem of the national question. There were in the structures and styles of the three major parties, profound avenues of discussing the national question.

Hence, the fact remains that despite the appellations of ethnic war-mongering usually ascribed to the parties of the First Republic and their leaders, these political entities never stopped exploring the avenues of proffering solutions to the national question. It is illuminating that, after the 1959 federal elections, the AG (the same AG) sent emissaries to both the NCNC and NPC, in search of a winning coalition to form the government. The NCNC later entered the coalition with the NPC (Nnoli 1978:160), all in the spirit of seeking solutions to the national question.

The truth therefore is that the national question is not about the dissolution of the different nationalities that make up a new nation-state or to outstrip such nationalities of every ethnic sentiment. It is more about the harmonious survival of these different nationalities, in their cosmopolitan new entity. The national question is also about ethnic identity and self-determination. Besides, the national question is about true federalism. Hence, the first generation Nigerian political parties, in the First Republic, were not profoundly deficient in volunteering answers to the national question. Incidentally, the individual greed of the ravenous politicians was exhibited under combatant ethnic nationalism. In the process, an entire political class and the political parties that represented the class became categorized as teams of ethnic belligerents.

According to Sklar (1983: xiii) therefore, the appearance of ethnic conflict in Nigerian national politics at this time, actually masked a more complex struggle between interests that were non-ethnic. Thus, in every region, political leaders exercised authority and dispensed patronage to build support for themselves and discourage or repress opposition. Thus did regional government become the fount of privilege and the fulcrum of social control. Defenders of the social order were strongly inclined to defend the regional power system as well. Opposing them, critics of the social order were just as determined to crack its protective political shell (Sklar 1983: xiii). The protective political shell of the social order was ethnic politics.

In some extant literature, the impression is also given that it was the bellicosity of the ethnically minded political leaders that led to the Civil war of 1967 to 1970 in Nigeria. Contrary to this notion, it was the apparent discontinuity in the volunteering of answers to the national question by legitimate political parties, occasioned by the intervention of the Military in Nigeria's political affairs which squarely led to the Nigerian civil war. It was not some feuding ethnic militias in the political parties that precipitated the civil war. It was precisely the gullibility of the impressionable political neophytes in military uniforms that resulted to the civil war. It was not that some irreconcilable political party gladiators were into combatant exchanges. It was not the political parties that executed the pogrom against the Igbos that saw nearly 60,000 nationals (Nnoli 1978) of the Igbo ethnic stock, exterminated even prior to the commencement of the civil war. The surrounding atrocities on all the sides were hatched by identifiable individuals. Hence, the issue that accelerated the process that dovetailed into discontinuity in the location of valid answers to the national question at the time was not that the political parties had strong presences at the regional levels. The issue is that some of the political leaders of the time were inherently too greedy for power and morbidly tyrannical in their tendencies, using the ethnic podium for the propagation of their heinous political philosophies.

It needs to be further emphasized that the main thrust of this study is not on if the activities of Nigerian political parties, from the earliest times to the current period were ever highly ethnicized. The major thrust of the paper is on the activities of the parties, towards addressing the issues that border on the national question. Furthermore, there are sometimes the tendencies to generically describe the parties of Nigeria's subsequent

Second Republic as being also all ethnically based or that the parties were all reincarnations of the political parties of the First Republic (see Azeez 2009, Omotola 2009, Ajagun and Odion 2010, Salawu and Hassan 2011 and Oladiran 2013). There is however in this general description, an inclination towards misrepresentation. Indeed, among the three dominant political parties, the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) mainly based in the current South-West geo-political region and the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP), also mainly based in the South-East, might fit into this common categorization. But the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was truly a largely cosmopolitan regrouping of political leaders from different First Republic persuasions. For example, the highly influential National Chairman of the NPN, Chief A. M. A. Akinloye, was a high-ranking member of the First Republican Action Group. He hailed from the South-West. Chief K.O. Mbadiwe from the South-East was equally highly influential in NPN. He was a notable participant in the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC). The fact remains therefore that the NPN had strong presence in different parts of the Nigerian Federation. The UPN and the NPP were stronger in some already mentioned areas and accordingly defeated the NPN in those areas at some of the elections. But this does not detract from the fact that the NPN was fully operational as a political party, in all these areas where they were even defeated. This same contention cannot be made about the UPN and the NPP in every part of the federation. Therefore, as a political party, the NPN was also providing a way forward, in responding to the national question. The coup d' état of December 1983, which ushered in the Muhammadu Buhari led Military Government, incidentally also ushered in the next stanza, in the debilitating template of discontinuities.

In this misleading continuum of historically dismissing all Nigerian political parties as ethnic assemblages, the only two parties that were registered by the Military, during the aborted Third Republic have not been spared. The parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) are also said to be strong in the South or based in the South and strong in the North or based in the North respectively (see Oladiran 2013, Azeez 2009). But, where would the parties have had their bases? Is it in neighbouring countries? The reality is that by being the only two parties permitted by the Military, these two parties were nationally based. By being nationally based, the parties were veritable platforms of responding to the national question. By aborting the Third Republic however, the trajectory of political parties and the national question in Nigeria, witnessed another discontinuity. The so-called political parties of the Sani Abacha brutality are not worth any salient mention, within the context of this study. They have been aptly described in eternal terms, as the five fingers of a leprous hand, evidently machinated to unanimously adopt General Abacha, as the Presidential candidate of all the ostensible political parties, to enable the dark-goggled politician in military clothing, transform into a de facto civilian leader (see Azeez 2009).

In our historical account above, it has already been submitted that People's Democratic Party (PDP) became the ruling party at the dawn of the 4th Republic. The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) was however seen to have deviated a bit from the usual ethno-religious dominated party politics of the past, with their membership and formation cutting across the clime of Nigeria (Azeez 2009: 4). The genesis of the PDP could be traced to a civil society organization, formed in late 1997 with the aim of enlightening citizens about their right and obligations in a militarized political atmosphere. The society, which later transformed into a group of 34, was made up of mostly antagonists of the General Sani Abacha's self-succession plan, including eminent Nigerians from both the North and South of the country. It was the only party that could boast of retired soldiers, business moguls, members of the dominant class, among others (Azeez 2009:4, Omoruyi 2001). It was also a party that from its antecedents seemed to possess the capacity to discuss the national question.

Invariably, the obsession of the politicians in PDP fold, apart from ousting the military, was to show that the political class could cohere into one formidable force. However, if this was desirable at the time, it was soon

to prove the undoing of the PDP. For even as the political class verily cohered and presented a formidable front that wrestled and became the dominant party in the country, the party became a collection and amalgam of strange bedfellows. Most of these strange bedfellows were to desert the PDP, with the registration of more parties and the expansion of the democratic space; which gave expression to the various tendencies that hitherto congregated in the party, allowing each to go its separate way (Azeez 2009:5). The dismembering of the PDP incidentally became the most current display of the pseudopodium of discontinuities. Yet, the truth remains that the lingering national question constitutes a great impediment to the multifaceted aspirations of the Nigerian state.

V. Concluding Remarks

The solution of the national question is possible only in connection with the historical conditions taken in their development (Stalin 1913) or in connection with the historical conditions taken in its escalation. It is in this regard that we have in this study taken the immensely historical rout that has brought us to this concluding intersection. In conclusion therefore, it needs to be acknowledged as highlighted by Salawu and Hassan (2011:32) that:

In the present 4th Republic, ethnic politics has less prominence than it had in the first and Second Republics. This may not be unconnected with the informal rotation arrangement of principal political offices of the federation among the six geo-political zones in the country.

It is instructive to highlight that the informal arrangement in question was a product of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). It was in the process of proffering solutions to the national question that the PDP as a political party arrived at this apparently effectual informal arrangement. Critical reference has also been made in the paper to the import of the National Conference of 2014 as a veritable vehicle for attempting to answer the national question. The fate of the provisions of the report, currently hangs in the balance. Hence, the implication of the defeat of the PDP at the Presidential polls of 2015 for Nigerian political parties, in attempting to answer the national question is that the subsisting possibilities have been truncated; it is another trajectory of discontinuity. The implication on the part of the victorious APC is that either advertently or inadvertently, the party has become an instrument of a truncated process of addressing the national question in Nigeria. As the APC takes over from the PDP therefore, the occasioning change needs to impede the tendencies of discontinuity on the issue of Nigerian political parties and the national question. As a matter of fact, this is among the greatest challenges that face the APC, which is currently not commonly viewed as a formidable national movement. The performance of the APC on this score will largely demonstrate in historical terms how Nigerian political parties as a collectivity have further hoisted or effectively participated in dismantling the debilitating obstacles, preventing the political class in Nigeria from positively responding to the national question.

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