

# **Democracy and Money Politics in Nigeria: Dilemmas of Private gains and Public losses<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

I deeply appreciate the privilege to deliver this keynote address of the General Assembly of the Social Science Academy of Nigeria. This is a unique honour which I will always treasure. It gives me the opportunity to speak to an audience of which many are revered names in the Social Sciences and Development Studies. I understand that the audience also includes policy makers and executors as well as fellow travellers in the academia. There is then little else I could ask for!

As used here democracy is a form of government in which the people elect their leaders to carry their voices and aspirations to the various levels—local council, State and federal. Ours is a situation that democracy cannot be divorced from development; it is above all else, a process of enhancing Nigeria's development. The form of democracy, including its processes, elections and its nature are part of the issues which facilitate or constitute cogs in the wheel of development.

## **Characteristics of Nigeria's democracy**

Many of the following characteristics are facilitated by the role of money through which parties are now "owned" and known processes of collective decision making and accountability have been usurped by money. The situation has been foisted on the Nigerians by the practice of money politics which has ensured that processes of checks and balances do not work and have instead, led to a situation where the entire structures are reduced to the whims of money bags.

In itemizing some of these characteristics, I note that the situation in the three levels of government is virtually the same. In the federal, the National Assembly is beholden to the Executive, most of the States are no different and the local councils are controlled by the State governors. The structures which should be bastions against domination are appropriated by a few and hence it is here contended that our brand of democracy is a situation of private gains and public losses.

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### **Nature of Political parties**

Parties of Nigeria's democracy have a short life span, many do not survive from one election to the next. The reasons are complex and range from parties created just to accommodate the ambitions of individual politicians rather than an organization of people who share general principles about how the country could be governed.

There were 93 political parties out of which 75 were de-registered on February 6, 2020; now there are 18 recognised ones. Many more are likely to be registered as the 2023 general elections approach. The seeming transient nature of parties denies them any character or ideology.

The nature of politics varies from one national context to the other. In the developed countries such as the UK, US and Western Europe, there are fewer political parties. What the parties stand for and their ideological foundations are well understood by the electorate. In the US the Democratic party protects the racial minorities, workers and women, while the Republican party which places more emphasis on investments, profits and lower business taxes than on welfare. The party supports free market capitalism, lower taxes and high profits for investors. By 2020, it has produced 19 of the 45 Presidents and supports traditional power over social pluralism.

### **Absence of ideology**

Political parties in Nigeria rarely espouse any ideology. The standard staple comprises statements about peace, progress and "moving Nigeria forward" in a situation which often assembles strange bedfellows just for purposes of winning elections. These ideas have become general shibboleths to which all political parties subscribe; there would be none which espouses the contrary. The general ideas are therefore reminiscent of what the Americans compare to motherhood and apple pie—to which all subscribe.

### **Eminent journalist Dan Agbese describes the situation aptly:**

We have no political ideologies, unless you count what is cynically called the politic of stomach infrastructure as our own preferred ideology. We join political parties not because of what they stand for in terms of their commitment to public good but by what we can personally gain either the main dish on the table of the crumbs below the table (Agbese, 2021:16).

This turn of events is different from past history. The first parties in Nigeria were the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) founded in 1923 by Herbert Macaulay, followed by the Nigerian Youth movement which was initially a pressure group which metamorphosed into a party in 1936. The parties of the First Republic (1960-1966) were National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), which was formed in 1944 as a broader organization from the Igbo State Union. The Action Group

which was formed in 1948 had roots in *egbeomo Oduduwa*, the pan Yoruba cultural association. Its activities were confined to Western Nigeria. In a similar manner the Northern People's Congress (NPC) formed in 1951 evolved from the *Jammiyyaar MutanenArewa* (Northern People's Congress). The three parties were all regional and exercised the ethnic agenda of the majority ethnic groups. Their ideology was not different from general worldview of the ethnic region and the dominant ethnic groups.

By the second republic some of the parties like the Peoples Redemption Party, PRP, was pro labour and pro poor, the *talakawa*. The Unity Party of Nigeria, UPN, was also ideologically to the left. According to Abba and Babalola,

Ideologically, the NPN, like the old NPC, was a conservative party in the sense that it made no pretext about changing the class nature of Nigerian society....., and is also committed to the preservation of traditional institutions. Both the NPP and the GNPP articulated liberalist ideas and programmes to function within a mixed economy. The UPN, like the defunct AG was a party with socialist/welfarist agenda like free education, free healthcare and so on. The PRP offered members of the left a platform for the struggle for power in the country. All the parties except the NPN were built around one man (UPN-Awolowo; NPP-Azikiwe; PRP-Aminu Kano; and GNPP-Ibrahim Waziri). These parties were personalised around their leaders who were in turn seen as patrons (2017:121-2).

At the moment there is no clear ideological position of the largest (PDP, APC, etc) or any of the parties, save perhaps the Labour party

### **Regular Carpet Crossing**

There is regular crossing from one party to the other. The logic here seems to improve the chances for the desired position, which if it fails in one party, the candidate tries another-usually a weaker party which may be little rooted in the State or local councils. In the 2019 elections a candidate did not obtain the opportunity to contest House of Representatives in one of the constituencies, she simply changed parties from the People's Democratic Party, PDP, to All Progressive Grand Alliance, APGA, and obtained not only the party ticket but also won the election. Other examples abound, including top politicians like Abubakar Atiku former presidential candidate, Ayo Fayose former Governor, and Orji Uzor Kalu, also former Governor. A celebrated case was the Edo Governorship election in September 2020 where the incumbent, Governor Godwin Obaseki, changed parties because he was denied the ticket in APC; he turned to the opposition, PDP. He easily obtained the ticket for governorship and proceeded to win in the polls. Decamping ceremonies are grand events with huge crowds and, sometimes with brooms—and even water- to “wash” the de-campees of the vestiges of the previous party.

Party switching could occur at any stage of the political process. Many change parties to obtain a desired position, while others change to consolidate such as becoming a member of the leading party. In December 2020, Governor David Umahi of Ebonyi State defected from PDP to APC; Governor Ben Ayadedid the same May 20, 2021. It is unclear why there are defections to a party under whose watch at the national kidnapping, banditry and killings are daily experiences. May be it is it all in pursuit of Adams Oshimole's promise: "join APC and your sins will be forgiven"

### **Politics as Business Investment**

Simultaneous with the absence of ideology is the new conception of politics as a form of business investment. This new conception derives from the vast opportunities that come with many elected positions such as award of contracts, influencing location of many projects such as sitting of universities, airports, agricultural projects, etc. The *raison d'être* of business is to make profits which has become the prime motive in politics. Muhammed Sa'id, former Minister of Environment in the Obasanjo regime expressed it eloquently:

*These days, politics is not what it used to be. To be in politics now, you need to have money. It is like business; you invest so that when you go into office you get your money back and make profit... (2021:33)*

What is more, politics has become brazenly about what's in it for the contestants; they are ready to 'chop' by all means. This new conception accounts for the huge numbers of rich people fiercely contesting for various positions.

### **Dominance of Moneybags**

In the Nigerian context where there is little crowd/community funding, money is provided mostly by financiers. Ultimately, these financiers become the *de facto* owners of the party with all the powers which come with ownership such as key decisions of which candidates should become flag bearers for the various positions.

The implications for internal democracy of the political parties are profound, decision making which ought to be a collective process yields to the dominance of money. Democracy, especially its major vehicle, political party, is conceived as bottom-up structure rather than a contrivance "owned" by the powerful financiers.

All of Nigeria's major parties have godfathers such as All People's Grand Alliance, APGA, which harvests the followership of Odumegu Ojukwu; Action Congress, and its successor Action Congress of Nigeria, ACN, forerunner of APC, which relies on Bola Tinubu; Orji Uzo Kalu supports the Progressive People's Party, PPA and Muhammadu Buhari supports for the Congress for Progressive change, CPC.

In keeping with the new conception, the financiers protect their investments through close supervision to ensure returns on investment. In Anambra State the financier had almost total control over the State finances; salaries were unpaid for months, strikes were interminable, frustrations abound. After some disagreement, the godfather, Chris Uba ensured the governor, Chris Ngige, did not return in the next election. The same scenario was played out between Governor Mbadinuju and Emeka Offor, the financier.

There is a gender dimension in it all the financiers avoid investing in women. Overall, women in Nigeria are poorer than men and therefore unable to mobilize the resources to run for office. There are also known distributions of money especially at the polling booths. This free distribution of money is not different from the disguised forms such as **tradermoni** and **marketmoni** which the ruling party rolled out during the campaigns for 2019 elections. Money dominates all aspects of the political process from nominations to elections.

Experiences in Nigeria show the central role of money in the political process. For virtually all offices, the contestants all relatively rich; richer than other residents. The application forms often in the millions and hardly would any poor person be found among governorship candidates, national assembly and even LGA councillor elections. As Onah and Nwali expressed it (2017:234):  
money was the main yardstick in admission into party cadres...it is ultimately the candidate who has the best prospects of mobilizing the most funds that eventually receives the nomination..... All election[processes]were a game of those with money, from party nominations to election.

from this conception, one finds Senators return to run for State governors, obviously because they would exercise more control over resources. Ordinarily, it should be about moving from State to federal, not the other way round.

In neighbouring Niger Republic the use of money continues, Dahiru Mangal in a novel version of 'foreign direct investment' poured 100 vehicles into elections in support of Mohammed Banzoun of Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS-Tarayya. The election went into a re-run but Banzoun won with over 55% of the votes in February 2021. As in other cases, the purpose of the seeming largesse is the same—part of politics as investment.

### **Virtual Exclusion of Women**

Because of ongoing dominance of patriarchy which also excludes women from opportunities to make money, the financiers are reluctant to invest in female candidates who are regarded as "bad investment", or "bad market". The process of exclusion of women boils down to labelling of which there are several. Some are labelled as culturally deviant because they are acting "in ways that contradict their culture". Furthermore, women are generally marginalized within the party hierarchies, hardly are any chair, secretary or in powerful positions.

A study of women's political participation in parts of Nasarawa and Southern Kaduna at the grassroots found that the odds were heavily stacked against them, and these include:

- Rigid gender roles which partition activities into male and female spheres and politics is regarded as excluded from women's roles; Women are overburdened by household chores which leave little time to attend political meetings;
- Women who engage in politics are called unflattering names, and urged to desist;
- High levels of violence and thuggery discourage them;
- Little support from family, community and even the political parties;
- Lower levels of education in general; they are less politically educated and may not know what offices are up; have narrower networks; have less community support and above all, have less money to invest

This situation is replicated in most of Nigeria with the northern states experiencing more exclusion.

### **Little Visible Development**

Democracy is about development and how to improve the situation for the vast majority of the people. Rather than any improvements, the economic base has grown weaker with factory closures (some spurred by Covid-19), high unemployment and growing despondency. The exchange rate has collapsed from N150/\$1 in 2015 when Buhari became President to the current N520/\$1 all in an import dependent economy. Government's policies are producing more hardships: in 2020 between May and November the pump price of petrol was increased seven times. Also, Nigeria went into recession twice in six years. The announcement by the current regime that it would lift 100 million out of poverty which came after Nigeria became the poverty capital of the world has so far little substance. Despondency and hopelessness confront Nigerians.

### **The Challenges and Pitfalls of Money Politics**

Money is needed to run political parties and indeed all political processes; the question therefore becomes how to provide it. All political parties have enrolment figures and also attempt to raise funds through launchings and dinners. Proceeds from such activities amount only to a fraction of the resource requirements; the situation paves the way for funders.

God-fatherism is investment for which the logic is to yield profits and the godfather stops at nothing to protect his investment,

There is a symbiotic relationship between the godfather and the godson, the godfather “invests” his resources in the godson and the godson must, at least should, on getting into office reciprocate by reimbursing his god father in kind and keeping absolute loyalty to the godfather in all respects, including decision making whilst in public office. The key role of all godfathers is [to] rule by proxy (Momoh, 2014:91)

The influence of money on politics is not just about needed resources. Typically, notions of collective decision making are ignored in favour of what the owners of the parties want. Also, there are issues of internal democracy which ultimately becomes a contest between “owners” of the party and the other members.

Furthermore, when elections for Presidency and Governorship are won, the dominance continues party structures such as chairman and members of the National Working Committee are controlled by them. This means that the godfathers also control the parties and protect their anointed sons/daughters. All this means that the party is outside the control of members and therefore a step towards dictatorship of the rich or some form of plutocracy.

### **Money Politics and a Catalogue of Public Losses**

There are three main areas in which godfathers seem to control, namely: 1. Choice of candidates, 2. formation of cabinets, and 3. Party structures, including discipline. Irrespective of what the party constitution contains, godfather have imposed candidates who either did not participate in the primaries at all or did not win. According to Egwu in the 2007 elections the governorship candidates in Adamawa, Taraba, Niger, Kebbi, Rivers, Imo, and Sokoto candidates who contested and won the Governorship did not take part in the primaries which, is notionally, a requirement for emerging as a candidate. They also rig elections by the use of thugs and/or writing results which have little bearing with what happened at the polls.

Other implications of the *status quo* include the dominance of political leadership by older people, including some who assumed leadership since the First Republic. Nigerians accept that “the young shall grow” but where politics is dominated by older people who recycle themselves, there is the challenge of breeding fresh leadership.

A minimum tally of these untoward situation includes the following:

- a. Nigeria’s health care system has never been reckoned as particularly effective, due to a combination of perennial shortages of equipment, virtual equipment and drugs. This situation has further deteriorated due to strikes. The situation is further compounded by Corona virus the management. After one year of programming, less than 1.5 million Nigerians have been tested. Figures about infection rates are regularly announced without explanations

about what age groups, and where in town most transmissions occur. On May 10, it announced lockdown and within 24 reversed itself, apparently because it must avoid disrupting the Eid payers which were due in three days.

- b. Appointments to federal positions and para-statal show gross lop-sidedness in spite of commitments to federal character. Bishop Hassan Kukah has said up to 85% of these have gone to Muslim Hausa /Fulani. There is little provision for women and youths in most of these appointments.
- c. Insecurity, especially mass killings, just last week 100 people were massacred overnight in Benue state; kidnapping have multiplied and assumed national ubiquity such that at any point in time there are kidnapped victims being held. Kidnappings are unrelenting and no places are spared two official residences in Aso Rock, our equivalent of the White House or 10, Downing Street. Key kidnappings incidents include:
  - (d) Chibok girls in April 9, 2014; Dapchi girls on February 19, 2018; Kankara, December 11 2020; Kagara February 17, 2021 and Jangebe February 26, 2021. The victims from Kagara were still being held when the Zamfara attack took place. On March 11, some 39 students were kidnapped in Mando Agricultural school, next door to a major military formation, the Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna; they were released after 55 days. This happened in spite of the pledge by the President that the Zamfara would be the last school kidnap. There was further kidnapping in Greenfield University Kaduna of which five of the victims were killed; others still held since April 21 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/23/nigerian-kidnappers-kill-3-abducted-students-in-rising-violence>).
  - (e) Unguarded and provocative utterances of highly placed officials

Highly placed people in government continue to make provocative utterances about pressing issues. The litany includes:

- a. After the massacre of some 48 farmers in Borno State in the last quarter of 2020, Presidential spokesman, Garba Shehu, as if to add insult to injury, said they did not obtain security clearance to be on their farms.
- b. Femi Adesina, another Presential spokesman, said those defending ancestral land from Fulani invasion need to be alive to do so, effectively surrender the land or risk death.
- c. Bala Mohammed, Governor of Bauchi said herdsmen have rights to carry AK 47; earlier he said the Fulani are global citizens and can appropriate land anywhere.

- d. Minister of Defence Bashir Magashi said that Nigerians should not be cowards, people should be bold to confront invaders/assailants who, after all, have only about three rounds of ammunition. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-02-18/defence-minister-tells-nigerians-not-to-be-cowards-when-facing-gunmen>
- e. Following the declaration of cessation of open grazing by Southern Governors, Shehu Malami, the Minister of Justice said Northern Governors could ban the sale of spare parts, a business mostly by the Igbo.
- f. Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, said kidnapping is not a federal offence, meaning FGN does not have to deal with it; he also said the FGN “the federal government has the capacity to crush Boko Haram/ISWAP terrorists in the north-east and bandits in the north-western parts of the country.” But is restrained because possible civilian collateral damage.
- g. KawuBura, a former chieftain of PDP but now in APC, alleged that Fulani mercenaries were imported to Nigeria to “assist” with the 2015 elections but have failed to return to their countries are responsible for the wave of criminality, including robbery and kidnapping. <https://www.thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2021/02/04/insecurity-apc-imported-fulani-herdsmen-for-2015-election-baraje-alleges/>
- h. The President, Mohammedu Buhari, only reads prepared speeches rather than talk to the people, granting interviews is out of the question. There are a few other democracies where this happens.
- i. As a further illustration of poor governance, routine matters such as payment of public of service salaries has no fixed date, stretching on many occasions into the first or even second week of the next month. The age- old payday no longer holds. Worse still, workers are owed several months salary arrears and are sometimes compelled to accept some percentage as dedicated by the governors.
- j. Suddenly, Nigerian National Identity, NIN, is imposed as a requirement for using mobile phone in the country. This demand has compelled anxious Nigerians to mass in large numbers in National Identity Management Commission, NIMC, offices to obtain this—all at a time of social distancing consequent on COVID-19.

The overall goal of democracy is to bring development but Nigeria’s experience is that this goal is generally elusive. Ours is a colossal failure both in terms of example of democracy and also in relation to bringing development. There must be alternatives to the current despondency which the cohabitation of private gains at the expense of public losses has thrust on the country.

### **What is to be done**

We have seen the problems and how the quest for private gains has foisted losses on the Nigerian public. While there are no easy answers those who want real democracy must not throw up their arms in surrender. I propose more monitoring and engagement with the elected in various levels of government and alternative funding mechanisms.

The situation of the nature of democracy and its poor governance (public losses) will remain until some alternative funding mechanism is explored. Nigeria has many community development and ethnically based associations, many of which were the nucleus for the first political parties. These associations raise funds and engage in community development efforts such as road and bridge construction, schools, clinics and provision of water and can be mobilized to fund parties. Already, many comprise gender, age, religious categories which can be harvested to ensure such interests are protected. What is needed is a bottom-up funding mechanism.

Realizing the above proposal will require a reorientation away from politics as business venture to a process through which people can govern themselves, ensure party democracy and bring development. The challenge would therefore include the extent of political education, new conscientization and extent to which the moneybags will be kept at bay. It will not be easy especially where the godfathers are throwing money around. But without alternatives Nigeria's democracy remains imperilled. The challenge is how to wrestle democracy from the modern kidnappers of collective destiny.