

POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS: THE BANE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the concept of political entrepreneurship, its features and impact on democracy in Nigeria. The problem statement is what effect political entrepreneurs have on efficient delivery of dividends of democracy in Nigeria. Much of politicking and party manifestoes abound during campaigns for political elections but not much of the dividends of democracy flow down to the average Nigerian after elections because of the activities of political entrepreneurs. The paper holds that most Nigerian politicians strive for elective positions and political appointments only for selfish economic benefits and those that sponsor them do so only for personal gains. Poverty and gullibility of both those aspiring to political elective or appointed positions and the electorate have been given as major reasons for the prevailing situation. The paper traces and links much of the inefficiency of democracy in Nigeria to the impact of these political entrepreneurs and ends with some recommendations such as legislatively restricting the amount of money political parties and their individual contestants can spend on electoral campaigns, ban of former Chief Executives of the three tiers of government from further contests into political positions and ban on internal and external financial sponsorship of political office aspirants as a way of sanitizing the political terrain. The paper concludes that except for political providence such suggestions as ban on certain category of political office holders would be a Herculean task, understandably as the same political elites who should be banned would be the ones to take the decisions on behalf of the citizenry.

Keywords: Political entrepreneurs, political kingmakers, political god-fatherism, political elites.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy involves running a government that by implication concedes to a social contract between the government as an institution and the citizenry. Such a contract implies that in the conduct of the affairs of government, the actors must primarily be interested in the protection of the society and the enthronement of justice in the political and social development of the component units. It is our point of departure in this paper therefore, to say that where, when and while a government as an institution or its actors or even those striving to be actors' de-emphasize the issue of societal security, justice and franchise for the people, the aims of democracy are compromised.

This paper holds that democracy as a system of politics and government in Nigeria has significantly changed from the pre-colonial traditional pattern and has continued to change since the Nigeria independence. A new and increasingly influential group has been introduced into politics and governance in Nigeria. They are the political entrepreneurs who have taken over the officiating and determination of the rules of the game of politics in Nigeria. What appears to be politicking, electioneering campaigns and executive decision-making from most government houses therefore are decisions of political entrepreneurs operating behind the scene.

An entrepreneur is a person who habitually creates and innovates to build something of

recognized value around perceived opportunities (Bolton and Thompson, 2000:5). The paper looks at a Political entrepreneur as one who has the habit of taking advantage of other people's potentials by picking those with some potentials, investing their resources on them and show-casing them up for political competitions and/or appointments

From 2003 to date, politics in Nigeria has witnessed series of clashes and expositions between political entrepreneurs and their lackeys. The Ngige episode in Anambra state when he was the state governor, the Saraki-Lawal case in Kwara state when Lawal was the state governor, and the Ladoja-Adedibu case in Oyo state are few of the examples of ventures by political entrepreneurs that backfired and became political ridicules. In some other cases the actors quickly mended their fence to avoid public notice. It is obvious that these mal-arrangements and political misadventures have negative effect on Nigerian polity and the democratic system.

This paper focuses on how political entrepreneurs have taken over politics in Nigeria, what has aided their victory and what obstacle this practice poses for democracy and political development of Nigeria or what is popularly referred to as dividends of democracy. We have made some suggestions such as ban on certain categories of politicians but we express reservations that such recommendations

would be opposed by the same political elites who would take the decision non behalf of the citizenry.

THE POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

With the rise of nationalism sweeping across colonies in the 1950s, it dawned on the British colonial masters that political independence was imminent from the late 50s. By 1960 when the independence was finally given to Nigeria, it was obvious that some geographical areas particularly within the northern Nigeria were not ready for the independence. Much of their fear was that though they were more politically developed from their experience in the indirect rule system during colonialism, they were educationally relatively backward compared to their counterparts in southern Nigeria with whom they were to contest politically. The first business of political entrepreneurship began as the North had to scout for the few educated elites of Northern origin, groom them and field them for elective and appointed political positions at both the regional and federal levels of government. The traditional rulers, finding themselves unsuitable for elective political positions by virtue of their exalted royal positions handpicked some educated elites, invested in them and had them elected to various political positions to represent the interest of the North. A similar thing could not be said of the likes of Chief Awolowo, Chief Azikiwe or Chief Akintola.

Soon after independence the cry for political and economic power sharing led to arguments concerning the intensive and extensive development at the grassroots levels. In a country with numerous ethnic groups, cries of discrimination, marginalization and neglect became louder by the day. To ensure fairness and justice, ethnic groups gathered to support and sometimes financially contributed to make political campaigns easier for their chosen ones. The expectation was that these representatives would bring home the needed political and economic benefits that would otherwise have been denied them. It was understandable then that many of those sponsored politicians neglected their expected national roles after attaining such positions and concentrated on regional or ethno-religious bloc-making that has become the foundation of political retrogression in Nigeria today.

From the oil boom days many businessmen, top bureaucrats and military top officers acquired wealth that could not be said to be totally legal. Some of these wealthy individuals, not possessing the requisite qualifications or adequate interest for political partisan elections or preferring to remain kingmakers have turned politics in Nigeria into candidate-sponsoring exercise. This redefinition of party politics to 'money-bag-politics' defined and regulated by the political entrepreneurs emphasized a particular brand of governance, one that prioritizes value for money, efficiency and

effectiveness of financial returns to themselves rather than to the citizenry. Of course this shift which has turned the dividends of democracy away from the majority in favor of the ruling class symbolized and controlled by the political entrepreneurs has fast eroded the basis for the much needed socio-political development of the country (Ichima:2014).

Meadowcroft (2001:22) was of the opinion that it is a feature of all modern democracies that party representatives are disproportionately selected from certain sections of the population: the elites. Generally, he said, rational self-interested individuals will only participate in activities where the personal benefits outweigh the personal costs. Candidate being offered sponsorship for elective positions are therefore drawn into the contest by prospects of socio-political gains of an elective or appointed position while the political god-fathers (political entrepreneurs) have their focus on the behind-the-scene benefits accruable from political appointments and protégés, payments for inflated and non-executed contracts, decisions as to locations of social infrastructures and general satisfaction from tele-guiding government decisions from their homes.

Domestic and sometimes foreign private financial donations to political parties or to individual contestants to help off-set campaign expenses are largely unregulated.

To worsen the situation, there are no strictly observed laws regulating the level of spending of political parties or political contestants during campaigns. But it is obvious that a well-financed political party or individual contestants that are financially adequately empowered are more likely to win more electoral fortunes at the polls than their opponents of lower financial resources. This is partly because the former will succeed more in spreading their manifestoes to the voters and in better positions to influence the rules of the electoral process in their favor. Besides, in Nigeria where mass poverty is a prevalent feature of most rural and urban dwellers the voters tend to be more attentive to 'copies of manifestoes wrapped in naira notes'. This is the politically inviting situation that political entrepreneurs usually take advantage of. The end result is that elected and appointed office holders are made to sacrifice political accountability and financial transparency in favor of the usually negative dictates of these political entrepreneurs.

FACTORS FAVOURING POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS

Our national newspapers are inundated with reports of billions of naira found to have been illegally embezzled by past and serving government/political office holders. The celebrated cases of Andrew and Deziani (the ex-Chief Executive of the NNPC and the former Minister of Petroleum respectively) during the

President Jonathan's regime show that like in most less developed and capitalist-oriented economies there are only a numerically insignificant but financially powerful minority controlling the national economy. It is obvious that much of these accumulated wealth were from suspicious sources and sustained through not-so-legal means. But many responsible Nigerians do not have the funds to contest elections except they are backed by some rich and affluent people. Because many of those qualified for or interested in partisan politics do not have the financial wherewithal, they easily fall prey to political entrepreneurs masquerading as sympathetic supporters.

The level of political development in Nigeria is low. The masses are therefore hardly able to or interested in differentiating between party manifestoes. They understand more when their own 'sons-of-the-soil' are to be elected or telling them who to vote for. And this presents good opportunities for political entrepreneurs.

The masses, by virtue of their level of poverty, are willing to sell their votes now for some peanuts than be ready to vote on basis of future expectations of public good. The current pressing need to pay school fees for their children already driven away from school or to pay debt owed their neighbors is more demanding than all future promises of political gains. As stated above, many responsible Nigerians do not have the funds

to contest election except they are sponsored by some rich and affluent people. The political entrepreneur's cash in on such situations by giving voters cash gifts. And like the Shakespearean shylock, they bound the voters and those to be voted for by oaths so as to ensure their loyalty in voting and subservience after being sworn into power respectively.

The gullibility of the aspiring politicians is another added advantage to the entrepreneurs. Eager to become elected governors, member of one legislative house or the other, the unsuspecting and uncalculating political aspirants play into the waiting hands of political entrepreneurs who encourage them until they reach a stage when retreating becomes socially shameful and continuing, an economic suicide. The entrepreneur then, with all political and economic persuasiveness and ingenuity bounds the political aspirants to their political aprons by sponsoring their campaigns and backing them with all influence in exchange for conditionalities that make the political aspirant a little higher than a house boy of the entrepreneurs after victory.

Private funding of political campaigns is almost unregulated in Nigeria. It therefore becomes a game of who spends more to buy votes. To ensure an equal playing ground therefore political aspirants cannot but have political godfathers who would spit money for money on their behalf even when they do

not initially fully understand the unexpected consequence of their trade-off.

THE UNANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES

With their ill-gotten wealth, the politicians buy thugs, equip them with sophisticated weapons and hard drugs and send them to cause havoc in the houses of political opponents and any one not sympathetic to their cause. Some are even alleged to pay government forces to kill, maim and rape opponents and their dependants. And of recent, reports in newspapers indicate that kidnapping of supporters and relations of political opponents has been introduced into the political arena. But political violence is self-perpetuating and has the capacity to persist and worsen in its intended and unintended consequences (Chenoy :2007). In Nigeria this practice has resulted in the alienation of and loss of potential good leaders as only the ruthless can survive the game.

The negative effect of violence is not only that which is caused by physical political clashes. It includes moral and psychological violence caused to the people when they lose their jobs and means of livelihood for not belonging to the ruling party. This induces the endless perpetuation of inequality around the people (Anyam: 2009). This is contrary to expected dividends of democracy

It is obvious that every investment is expected to yield profits. The millions of private funds spent on electoral

campaigns, vote purchases and physical sacrifice expended on the elections or appointment of political lackeys are expected to be scooped. The easy way out is for these political office holders to engage in various corrupt and illegal practices to satisfy their political godfathers: inflated contract prices, payments for contracts not executed, contract awards that do not follow due process and out-right looting of the treasury become the in-thing. In the celebrated case of Ngige, when he was the governor of Anambra state, some state government cheques were reported to have been signed in advance to the tune of millions of naira in favor of the governor's political father. The money that was meant for development projects was therefore given to an individual for sponsoring the governor to win the governorship election. Chief Adedibu of Ibadan was reported to have said the Oyo state governors are placed there by his efforts and so they had to share the security votes with him.

As part of dividends accruing to political entrepreneurs, appointments to sensitive and lucrative leadership positions in the government or public parastatals are to be first approved by them. The reported Oyo state episode between ex-Governor Ladoja and late Chief Adedibu illustrates the example of an insatiable political entrepreneur interested not only in the control of the state treasury but also in

deciding who occupies what post in the government offices. The end result is that, in agreement with Onifade and Ojukwu (2009), many top positions in our public and political offices are occupied by people with little or no capacities to run such offices except their excellence in subservience and sycophancy. The failures of most public organizations in meeting public expectations therefore need no further explanations. Perhaps, it is adequate to say that our leaders have failed to understand that their behavior has not resulted in the planned dividends of democracy. Or more appropriately, it is apt to agree that it is difficult to get a man to understand something when his survival depends on his not understanding it.

Pottie (2002) stated that many of the votes during elections to political offices are usually bought by aspiring politicians using cash or material gifts. The voters are therefore not in any advantageous position to make pressing demands on the political office holders for provision of social amenities promised during electioneering campaigns. Though the government policy prescribes provision of social services through grassroots participation therefore, this goal cannot be pursued because “the voters had eaten the sour grapes that had set their teeth on edge”. It is therefore obvious that the three tiers of government in Nigeria are out of reach of the electorate and therefore indifferent to public opinion. There is apparently no link between the political practice and democracy.

There is an over-exaggerated political belief that the 'elected' representatives adequately represent the opinions of their constituencies and would bring in constituency projects to improve the lives of the people. This has become very far from the truth and can therefore be said to be the antithesis of dividends of democracy. The current attempt to recall a federal senator from Kogi state because he has apparently failed to represent his constituency is adequate testimony to the missing link between practical politics and democracy in Nigeria.

As the implicit political contract between the electorate and the government at the three tiers wanes to a fearful level of non-challance and resignation, it therefore becomes harder for government to address issues such as social security, staff welfare, constituency demands, employment generation or even pensions for those who spent their youthful age working honestly for the nation. All these testify to the uncertainty of democratic dividends in this uncertain political terrain.

For clearer dividends of democracy, there must be an appreciable level of capacity to agree among policy makers. This capacity has however become so lacking in an increasing manner in the face of alarming and unpredictable harsh political terrain inundated with political prostitution of dumping political parties upon which politicians were elected into offices (party

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cross carpeting). There are still no clear guidelines on when politicians can change political parties. We are still guided by

illegality shrouded in acclaimed individual rights to associations.