BEYOND ONE PARTY STATE DOMINANCE: A REVIEW OF RECURRENT ISSUES IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the recurring concerns connected with party dominance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, focusing on the obstacles given by the de facto two-party system dominated by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All-Progressives Congress (APC). While Nigeria restored multiparty democracy in the 1990s, genuine democratic consolidation has been hampered by entrenched power dynamics, patronage networks, and a lack of political variety. The PDP's long-standing dominance from 1999 to 2015, followed by the APC's rise, has created a political environment that marginalizes minor parties and inhibits true political competition. This research also looks into the impact of internal party democracy, ethnic and regional politics, political defections, and the widespread influence of political godfathers on Nigeria's political landscape. Recent events, notably the rise of the Labour Party (LP) in the 2023 elections, indicate a probable shift in political dynamics, as urban and young voters increasingly prioritize governance and policy problems over ethnic and regional loyalty. The findings show that voters are more aware of the relevance of programmatic socioeconomic issues, implying that Nigeria's democratic norms are maturing. However, the persistent issues of weak opposition, limited political competition, and entrenched corruption create serious worries about the survival of democracy in the Fourth Republic. This study adds to our knowledge of Nigeria's political trajectory by emphasizing the need for election changes to build a more inclusive and competitive political scene.

Introduction

The strength of a country's democratic institutions, including political parties, is frequently used to assess its health and resilience (IDEA 2017). Political parties, in addition to their traditional functions of "electoral structure," "symbolic integration," and aggregation of citizens' interests, also contribute to ensuring political accountability, democratic stability, and national unity (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). Political parties are expected to be inclusive and transparent in their operations, as well as to adhere to democratic principles, particularly in their internal processes, in order to be effective (Morton 2017). Furthermore, political parties play a crucial role in representing diverse perspectives

and fostering public participation in decision-making processes. Their ability to adapt to changing societal needs and effectively communicate their platforms can greatly impact the overall health of a democracy.

While many Sub-Saharan African nations re-instituted multiparty democracy in the 1990s, democratic consolidation has stagnated across the continent. One of the causes for slow or delayed democracy is African leaders' ongoing power over the political process (Leila, 2020). Indeed, parliament, the primary democratic institution responsible for providing checks and balances on the administration, has frequently been found to be insufficient to actively participate in lawmaking and hold the executive accountable.

Political party systems may be one-party, two-party, or multi-party. The higher the number, the more likely the electorate will be confronted with alternative platforms. Over the previous six decades, Nigeria has tried with several systems. In heterogeneous cultures like Nigeria, the one-party system has been hailed as a way to build national unity while also managing religious and ethnic diversity (Hamalai et al., 2017). Regardless of its theoretical benefits, it has been argued that a one-party system is more likely to result in authoritarianism and political exclusion. Alternatively, the two-party system, in which parties have distinct ideological positions, such as in the United States and the United Kingdom, is said to benefit the electorate by providing political information in a simplified and understandable manner, political stability and balance, and fewer voting options. Others, on the other hand, have highlighted the problems with the two-party system, such as the exclusion of minority views, limited choice (and thus voter apathy), and, in some cases, negative partisanship, also known as affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). This system has a lengthy history in Nigeria, having been tested in 1992 and 1993 (during the so-called abortive Third Republic) (Oyediran & Agbaje, 1991; Lewis, 1996; Adejumobi, 1997). This, like the one-party system, failed because the two parties were ideologically similar (Yaqub, 2002). As a result, many argue that the two-party system in Nigeria has not effectively represented the diverse political views and interests of the population. The lack of ideological diversity within the parties has led to challenges in addressing the complex issues facing the country.

Since the establishment of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999, the country's political landscape has been characterized by a developing system of government, with a shift from military control to civilian democracy. Despite this transformation, a few large political parties, most notably the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All-Progressives Congress (APC), have dominated the political sphere, raising worries about the long-term viability of real democratic plurality. The dominance of one or two political parties has raised concerns about inclusivity, internal party democracy, and the general viability of Nigeria's democratic experiment.

A useful component of the more recent shift in the study of Nigerian political parties has gone beyond this previous emphasis on 'valence' language, suggesting that diverse ideological perspectives may be discerned in both governing practice and election debate. While Thurston (2018) and Obe (2019) highlight subtle but significant differences in left/right terms in the economic platforms of the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and People's Democratic Party (PDP), Egwim (2022) contends that these dominant parties have 'converged ideologically at the center' by embracing 'the post-Cold War global consensus on neoliberal ideology'. This paper seeks to explore the recurrent issues associated with the beyond one-party state dominance in Nigeria Fourth Republic.

Statement of the Problem

The People's Democratic Party (PDP) dominated Nigeria's Fourth Republic for 16 years (1999-2015), followed by the establishment of the All-Progressives Congress (APC), establishing a de facto two-party system that marginalizes smaller political parties and hinders real political competition. This tendency has hampered the formation of a truly pluralistic democracy as political power continues to shift between two major parties, leaving less opportunity for alternative voices and policy perspectives. Despite constitutional provisions for multiparty democracy, the political landscape is confined by patronage networks, ethnic and regional alliances, and elite control, inhibiting the creation of a more inclusive and ideologically varied political system. The ongoing struggle to break away from this dual dominance poses a fundamental challenge to democratic consolidation, political accountability, and policy innovation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Literature Review

Historical Background of Party Dominance in Nigeria

Nigeria's Fourth Republic started with the People's Democratic Party (PDP) assuming power following the 1999 elections, which marked the country's restoration to civilian governance after years of military dictatorship. From 1999 until 2015, the PDP controlled both the federal government and the majority of state governments. However, the PDP's dominance was challenged by the All-Progressives Congress (APC), a coalition of opposition parties that ascended to power after the 2015 general elections. The PDP's long-standing dominance, followed by the APC, has produced an atmosphere in which smaller political parties struggle to compete, reducing political variety and competitiveness in the country (Fagbadebo & Ruffin, 2019). This lack of political variety has raised concerns about the consolidation of power and potential for abuse within the ruling parties. Additionally, the dominance of these two major parties has hindered the development of a robust multi-party system in Nigeria.

Historically, Nigeria's political environment has shifted between multiparty systems and one-party dominance. Several political parties competed in elections during the First Republic (1963–1966), although the majority were regional in nature and connected with certain ethnic groups. This regionalism sparked fierce political competition along ethnic lines, resulting in severe splits. The military coups that followed the First Republic suspended civilian rule and halted political party activity, helping to restructure party structures in following republics (Olanrewaju, 2015). These historical considerations continue to shape the structure of Nigerian party politics today.

The restoration to civilian authority in 1999, which established the Fourth Republic, provided a chance to form national political parties. Despite this potential, the PDP swiftly established itself as the dominant force, leveraging its organizational strength, extensive elite network, and control over state resources. This dominance maintained across numerous election cycles, raising worries about the inclusivity of Nigeria's political system and the marginalization of minor parties. The APC's emergence as a powerful opposition force in 2013 constituted a watershed moment, but it did not totally resolve challenges of political plurality (Oni & Alabi, 2015). The APC's rise did shake up the political landscape, but the PDP still held significant influence. This dynamic has sparked debates about the need for further reforms to ensure a more competitive and diverse political environment in Nigeria.

The APC's ascent to power in 2015, following the historic loss of the PDP, was viewed as a watershed moment in Nigerian democracy. This political change was notable since it marked the first time in Nigeria's post-independence history that an incumbent party lost a national election. Nonetheless, despite the APC's triumph, the two-party system has continued to dominate Nigeria's political environment, excluding minor parties that find it impossible to compete with the two big actors. This has resulted in a de facto two-party system, if not in legislation (Levan, 2019). This dominance of the APC and PDP has raised concerns about the lack of political diversity and competition in Nigeria, potentially limiting the representation of diverse interests and viewpoints. As a result, there have been calls for electoral reforms to level the playing field for smaller parties and promote a more inclusive political landscape in the country.

Recent electoral changes, notably in the 2023 elections, have attracted renewed interest in the policies and socioeconomic platforms of political candidates. One of the distinctive elements of the 2023 election was the heightened focus on the leading contenders' economic and social plans. This was a shift from the conventional emphasis on ethnic, regional, and religious feelings that has dominated Nigerian elections. For the first time, voters engaged fully with the candidates' policy ideas, indicating a maturing in Nigerian democratic practice (Thurston, 2018; Egwim, 2022). This shift in focus reflects a growing awareness among Nigerian voters of the importance of policy-driven governance in addressing the country's economic and social challenges. It also signals a potential turning point towards a more issue-based and progressive political landscape in Nigeria.

The 2023 election was especially remarkable for its unusual conditions, including the Central Bank's "cashless" policy, which restricted cash withdrawals. This strategy had an impact on traditional voter mobilization and campaign funding tactics, which had previously depended on cash distribution to gain votes. Furthermore, the Labour Party, which had hitherto been sidelined in national politics, made considerable gains in this election, threatening the PDP and

APC's supremacy and suggesting a probable shift in Nigeria's political dynamics (Fourchard & Sikiru, 2023). These changes forced political parties to adapt their strategies and find new ways to connect with voters and fund their campaigns. The outcome of the election highlighted the evolving landscape of Nigerian politics and the increasing influence of non-traditional parties.

This growing emphasis on socioeconomic problems in Nigerian elections represents a shift from the long-held belief that Nigerian political parties lack distinct ideological roots. For many years, analysts contended that Nigerian elections were largely motivated by patronage politics and appeals to ethnic and regional identities. However, recent research indicates that Nigerian political parties, while not overtly aligned with conventional left or right ideology, are increasingly basing their electoral campaigns around programmatic socioeconomic problems (Angerbrandt, 2018; Usman, 2020).

A comparative study of African democracies' elections, particularly those in the "third wave" of democratization, has revealed a similar pattern. African political parties, especially those in Nigeria, are emphasizing policy matters in their campaign agendas. Although these parties do not fully embrace clear-cut ideological positions, such as left- or right-wing economics, they do shape their political discourse around concrete socioeconomic concerns, implying a gradual shift toward a more substantive form of democracy (Bleck & Van De Walle, 2012; Elischer, 2013). This shift indicates a growing recognition of the importance of addressing tangible issues affecting citizens' daily lives in order to gain electoral support. It also suggests a maturation of democratic processes in African countries as parties focus on governance and policy-making.

The Rise of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Political Hegemony (1999-2015)

Between 1999 and 2015, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) emerged as Nigeria's major political party. This dominance was mostly due to its extensive network of political elites, strategic alliances, and control over state resources. The PDP's incumbency advantage enabled it to keep power across numerous election cycles, although questions were raised about its internal democracy. Factionalism and power rivalries among prominent political figures regularly afflicted the party, resulting in internal conflicts. Many party members left to opposing parties in protest at candidate choices and internal dynamics, revealing the party's fundamental flaws (Adejumobi, 2000). Despite these challenges, the PDP remained a dominant force in Nigerian politics for many years. However, its inability to address internal issues ultimately led to a decline in its popularity and influence.

The PDP's ascension to power stemmed from its roots as an offshoot of the G-34, a group of notable Nigerians who opposed General Sani Abacha's self-succession scheme. The G-34, along with 65 minor political organizations, founded the PDP, which swiftly became the dominant national party. Among the party's early members were famous people, including Dr. Alex Ekwueme, Chief Solomon Lar, and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar. However, the PDP suffered an early setback when the People's Consultative Forum (PCF), led by the Afenifere faction, and the Southern Leadership Forum (SLF) split over worries about the entrance of discredited politicians into the party's leadership. These splits group eventually created the All Peoples Party (APP), which became a major opposition party (Egwim, 2020; Briggs, 2023). Despite this setback, the PDP continued to grow in influence and eventually won the presidential election in 1999, marking the beginning of its dominance in Nigerian politics. The party's ability to navigate through challenges and maintain its popularity solidified its position as a key player in the country's political landscape.

Despite these hurdles, the PDP maintained its political dominance for 16 years, winning presidential, national assembly, and gubernatorial elections with large margins. The party's control over governmental resource distribution, as well as its capacity to persuade opposition legislators to defect, enhanced its national dominance. For much of this time, the opposition was seen to have little chance of defeating the PDP in any major election. The concentration of political power and resources at the center helped cement the PDP's position as Nigeria's ruling party until it was defeated by the All-Progressives Congress (APC) in 2015 (Ambose, 2023; Egwim, 2020). The PDP's dominance was also attributed to its ability to appeal to a wide range of voters across different regions and demographics. Additionally, the party's establishment of a strong grassroots network contributed to its electoral success.

Emergence of the APC and the 2015 Electoral Shift

The formation of the All-Progressives Congress (APC) in 2013, following the merger of four opposition parties—the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and a faction of the All-Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), marked a watershed moment in Nigeria's political landscape. The APC's win in the 2015 general elections, which marked the first loss of an incumbent president, was hailed as a watershed moment in democratic consolidation. Despite its election victory, the APC inherited many of the problems that plagued its predecessor, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), including internal democratic deficits, political godfatherism, and regionalism.

Nigeria's political atmosphere changed dramatically in the run-up to the 2023 elections, with the advent of the Labour Party (LP). The LP, led by former Anambra State Governor Peter Obi, seized on considerable dissatisfaction with the APC and PDP, particularly among Nigeria's young and urban middle class voters. This marked a departure from the two-party system, establishing the LP as a genuine third force in the country's politics (Fourchard & Sikiru, 2023). Obi's popularity indicated a rising desire for change, notably in governance, economic reform, and anti-corruption measures (Egwim, 2020). The LP's platform focused on addressing issues such as unemployment, infrastructure development, and social welfare programs, resonating with many voters who felt marginalized by the traditional parties. As the election approached, the LP gained momentum and posed a significant challenge to the long-standing dominance of the APC and PDP in Nigerian politics.

Despite the growth of the Labour Party, the 2023 presidential election was principally contested between Bola Tinubu of the APC and Atiku Abubakar of the PDP. Tinubu used his political clout in the South-West and his key role in founding the APC, while Atiku attracted support from the northern area and PDP strongholds. However, Peter Obi's Labour Party gained ground in important metropolitan regions, defying established voting trends (Roelofs, 2023). The 2023 elections also witnessed an increased emphasis on governance, economic management, and insecurity, in contrast to earlier elections that were driven by ethnic and regional loyalty (Husaini, 2020). This shift in focus indicated a growing maturity in the Nigerian political landscape, with voters prioritizing issues over identity politics. The election results reflected a more nuanced understanding of governance and policy among the electorate.

Furthermore, the Central Bank of Nigeria's (CBN) cashless policy, which was enacted shortly before the elections, had a substantial impact on political dynamics, reducing vote-buying tactics that had long dominated Nigerian elections (Bleck & Van de Walle, 2012). However, the elections were not without controversy, with charges of voter suppression, errors in the results collation, and questions about the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) impartiality (Thurston, 2018). Despite these hurdles, Bola Tinubu was pronounced the winner, ensuring the continuance of APC supremacy; however, the Labour Party's growth hinted at a changing political future.

To summarize, the 2023 elections displayed both continuity and change in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. While the APC retained control, the election demonstrated the electorate's growing preference for other political parties, as seen by the Labour Party's victory. The emphasis on policy concerns and changes, notably economic and security challenges, represented a significant shift in voter preferences, indicating a shifting political environment in Nigeria (Levan, 2019). This election also highlighted the increasing importance of issues such as corruption and governance in shaping voters' decisions, signaling a maturing democracy in Nigeria. Moving forward, it will be crucial for political parties to address these concerns and adapt to the evolving landscape to remain competitive in future elections.

Recurrent Issues in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (2015-2024)

1. **Weak Opposition and Limited Political Competition:** One of the most persistent issues of Nigeria's Fourth Republic is the opposition parties' weak strength and capacity. The All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) have maintained their dominance, marginalizing other parties, limiting political competition, and eroding Nigeria's democracy. Although the Labour Party (LP) emerged as a

prominent contender in the 2023 elections, it still lacks financial resources, organizational structure, and national reach as compared to the APC and PDP (Fourchard & Sikiru, 2023). Smaller parties seldom pose a strong challenge in national elections, sustaining a de facto two-party system that limits democratic plurality (Fagbadebo & Ruffin, 2019). This lack of political diversity hinders the representation of various interests and perspectives within the Nigerian political landscape. The dominance of the APC and PDP also raises concerns about accountability and transparency in governance.

2. **Internal Party Democracy and Leadership Crisis**: Both the APC and the PDP have continued to struggle with internal democratic concerns. Candidate selection processes within the two major parties are frequently rife with manipulation, favoritism, and the influence of political elites, or "godfathers." This has heightened tensions among the party ranks, resulting in defections and political instability. Many political leaders dissatisfied with internal dynamics in the APC and PDP have resigned to other parties or run independently, only to return when political prospects become limited (Obe, 2021). The absence of open and democratic processes inside political parties has harmed electoral integrity and eroded public faith in the political system (Omotola 2010). This lack of transparency and fairness within party structures has led to disillusionment among voters and contributed to a growing sense of apathy towards the political process. Without meaningful reforms to address these issues, the cycle of manipulation and instability within major parties is likely to continue, further undermining democracy in Nigeria.

3. **Ethnic and Regional Politics:** Ethnic and regional differences remain important in Nigerian politics. Both the APC and the PDP have historically depended on ethnic and regional allegiances to gain political triumphs, frequently sacrificing national unity in favor of local interests. The APC has retained considerable support in the northern areas, while the PDP has a bigger presence in the southern and eastern regions. The 2023 elections confirmed these trends; however, the Labour Party's rise under Peter Obi revealed the rising dissatisfaction with ethnically oriented politics, particularly among urban and young voters (Egwim, 2020). Despite this, ethnic politics is firmly entrenched, impeding the expansion of issue-based political participation (Aiyede, 2020). This entrenched ethnic politics continues to hinder the development of a more inclusive and issue-driven political landscape in Nigeria. The challenge remains for political parties to transcend ethnic divisions and prioritize national interests over regional loyalties.

4. **Defections and Political Instability**: Political defections have been a recurring aspect in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, with politicians often switching allegiance between the APC and the PDP for tactical or personal reasons rather than fundamental disagreements. Defections have resulted in political instability and governance inconsistency, as politicians frequently respond to fluctuating power dynamics rather than pursuing unified policy agendas (Roelofs, 2023). This has masked the ideological differences between the two major parties, making it harder for people to distinguish between them on policy grounds (Aiyede, 2020). These defections have also led to a lack of accountability and transparency in governance, as politicians prioritize their own interests over the needs of the people they were elected to serve. The constant switching of parties has eroded public trust in the political system and hindered the development of strong, principled leadership in Nigeria.

5. **Godfatherism and Political Corruption**: The influence of political godfathers remains an important issue in Nigerian politics. Powerful individuals with influence over political processes frequently decide who becomes party candidates, weakening democratic norms and excluding prospective reformers and technocrats. Both the APC and the PDP have been accused of fostering godfatherism, which

encourages corruption and prioritizes personal wealth over public service. This dynamic has not only hampered political changes but has also established a patronage structure that promotes corruption at all levels of government (Olanrewaju, 2019). Despite popular requests for greater openness and change, political elites continue to maintain disproportionate power over candidate selection and resource distribution (Thurston, 2018). This perpetuates a cycle of corruption and inefficiency that hinders progress and development in Nigeria. Without significant reforms to address these issues, the country's political landscape may continue to be plagued by patronage and nepotism.

Conclusion

As Nigeria's Fourth Republic evolves, the dominance of one or two political parties poses a substantial barrier to the establishment of a dynamic, competitive democracy. To get past the challenges associated with one-party domination, Nigeria must work on developing smaller political parties, encouraging internal democracy within parties, and tackling the fundamental causes of ethnic politics, defections, and godfatherism. The future of Nigerian democracy is dependent on political parties' capacity to overcome these obstacles and strive toward a more inclusive, transparent, and competitive political system.

Recommendations

i. Implement measures that level the playing field for minor political parties, such as campaign financing reforms, media access, and lower registration obstacles, to foster political competition and pluralism.

ii. Political parties should use open and democratic candidate selection methods to reduce the influence of political elites ("godfathers") and promote inclusion and accountability within party structures.

iii. Enhance civic education initiatives to raise voter understanding of the significance of policy-driven voting, urging voters to prioritize concerns above ethnic or regional attachments.

iv. To coincide with voters' changing tastes, political parties should promote policy-driven campaigns that target critical national concerns such as economic reforms, security, and infrastructure development.

v. Reinforce the independence of democratic institutions such as the court and legislature in order to decentralize political power and hold political leaders responsible.

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