

IS THE PARTY REALLY OVER? RETHINKING THE ROLE OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION THEORY IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

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Abstract: The point of departure of this paper is that sustainable development can only occur in a context where peace prevails. This article applies John Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory in the political sphere as a tool for representation and ensuring bottom-up, inclusive and locally led political processes. Besides from promoting the reduction of violence, conflict transformation theory also emphasises the need for social justice. In increasing social justice, citizens must have access to political processes and a voice in decisions that affect them. How do these assertions translate in diverse societies with multiple interests and demands? Can the current political party structures adapt and transform to address these needs and demands? This article will focus on the role of political parties in Nigeria and how they can contribute to true representation within the ideals of conflict transformation.

Keywords: Conflict; Election; Political Parties; Violence

Introduction

Since Nigeria's political independence in 1960, political parties have played a dominant role in the country's politics. Their dominance however is mostly seen in power contestations, inter and intra-party conflicts, winning support by speaking to ethnic or regional orientations, and sometimes employing violence and not necessarily pushing for the needs and interests of the population. These have had a negative impact on democratic activities such as elections and increased the likelihood of civil unrests. Against this backdrop, it is important to understand the roles of Nigeria's political parties in contributing to violent conflict especially during elections. This article focuses on the importance of political parties beyond their role in the strengthening of democracy to arguing for their critical importance and engagement in conflict transformation efforts. The central argument of this article is that conflict transformation theory provides guidelines and principles that can be extremely useful in determining how political party structures adapt and reform internally and in society in order to address the multiple needs and demands in society. In doing this, it ensures that they are actively involved in preventing the occurrence of violent conflicts in the political arena.

This article begins by unpacking conflict transformation theory before engaging in a discussion on the role of political parties as agents that can both trigger conflicts and positively transform them to benefit the masses. The article examines the roles of political parties through three key ingredients for conflict transformation: the reduction of violence related to political competition, increasing justice and rebuilding human relationships. In this regard, the evolution of political parties in Nigeria as well as their roles in promoting election-related conflicts is discussed. In the lead up to the 2015 general elections, the role of political parties in ensuring peaceful and inclusive elections is of critical importance. The paper concludes with key recommendations on how to re-engineer and situate political parties to actively contribute not only to peaceful and fair elections but to also represent the interests and needs of the population, regardless of their ethnic or regional affiliation.

Conflict Transformation Theory

As a response to conflict, conflict transformation focuses on addressing the context, content and relationships within a conflict situation. Conflict transformation, as defined and proposed by John Lederach (2003, p. 14), seeks "to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive

change processes that **reduce violence, increase justice** in direct interaction and social structures, and **respond to real-life problems in human relationships**". Broadly speaking, conflict transformation is focused on achieving these three main goals: reducing violence, increasing justice and restoring fragile relationships (Lederach, 1995, p. 14). In reducing violence, the content of the conflict and its underlying causes need to be addressed; and in increasing justice, people must (and are able to) actively participate in the political process and be given the space to voice their opinions on issues that affect them (Mischnick, 2007, p. 60). In restoring relationships, the interactions within the society and fragile relationships between groups are positively restored. Ultimately conflict transformation involves processes and efforts to change the course of conflict towards more peaceful and sustainable relationships.

Conflict transformation has also been defined as "actions and processes which seek to alter the various characteristics and manifestations of conflict by addressing the root causes of a particular conflict over the long term" (Austin, Fischer, & Ropers, 2004, p. 464). In addressing the root causes, conflict transformation changes the structures and issues that birth conflict. In situations where there is a lack of clear rules and systems for conflict management (Matlosa & Shale, 2008 p. 23), (and in this case conflict transformation), conflicts can worsen and become violent. It is therefore important to understand the role and importance of political parties in these actions and processes, and how they can contribute to the root causes and escalation of a conflict.

Beyond the two key perspectives provided above, Transformation also involves the "restructuring of social institutions as well as a redistribution of power from high-power groups to low-power groups" (Botes, 2003). Such institutions and groups include government, political parties, warring groups and other key groups in that specific society. The redistribution of power has the potential to douse tensions related to contestations over the control of state machinery and resources – factors which triggers conflict. Political parties are important actors in this process as they actively engage in these power contestations and power allocations.

An examination of conflict transformation theory against the backdrop of how political parties function in contemporary politics underscores their failure to contribute to healthy and burgeoning democracies and in preventing conflict. Citing, Nafziger *et al* (2000), Clements (2004) notes that political parties feature in already fragile societies that are characterised by "government exclusion and persecution of distinct social groups; rule by kleptocrats or entrenched minorities and where there is weak government legitimacy." Political parties therefore have a tendency to become immersed in a process where specific personal interests and personal agendas supersede the interests of the wider population. In such cases ethnic interests and agendas trump party ideologies leading to a breakdown of party structures and the worsening of intra- and inter-party relations.

Infighting within political parties has the capacity to negatively distort their image within the broader society. Numerous cases of in-fighting for political power and leadership positions within political parties have been documented. For instance, a 2010 report by the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) documented cases of in-fighting between the Democrats and Liberals over positions of leadership within the US Congress¹. Similarly, Hawley (2013) reported complaints of backstabbing, bullying and secret deals with regards to decisions on various appointments within Germany's Pirate Party^{2,3}.

According to Matlosa and Shale (2008), inter-party conflicts have created an "image of political parties being too consumed by the scramble for power (party and state power) and less concerned about the welfare of the people (its members and society at large)". And so rather than engage in constructive activities like ensuring the basic needs of the population are met, or calling for even development processes that cater to all identities members, of political parties are sometimes enmeshed in mortal struggles over the control of party's machinery. Such conflicts take more dangerous dimensions when they involve the relationship with other political parties. In many scenarios, consolidation of power and resources by one long standing ruling party creates an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian government which provides an opportunity for impunity and the creation of armed factions to challenge government. As a result, the failure of political parties to adequately represent the interests of the population creates a large deficit in any democratic process. In times of conflict many groups are forced to rely on alternate and

¹ See American Broadcasting Company "Political Parties Fight over Power", Available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/republicans-democrats-fight-power/story?id=12077278>, (Accessed 18th February, 2013).

² See, Spiegel Online, "Allegations of Bullying and Backstabbing: Discontent Grows within Pirate Party Ranks", Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/political-infighting-in-german-pirate-party-a-837046.html> (Accessed 18th February, 2013).

informal structures to push their agendas forward. In some cases, these structures utilise violence as a form of expression especially in situations of gross injustice.

Given that political parties are at the heart of electioneering, we argue that locating political parties in peace-building processes is quintessential to the attainment of a peaceful and democratic society. Conflict transformation helps to do just that by providing avenues and identifying levels through which political parties can contribute to reducing direct violence and ensuring sustainable peace. These efforts will not only ensure that political parties are involved in the peace building process but that they also become advocates of peace thus preventing the spate of election-related violence that has come to characterise the political landscape of many countries.

Political Parties as Agents of Conflict Transformation

Broadly speaking, conflict transformation plays out through processes of “nation-building, national reconciliation, healing, change agency and social transformation” (Botes, 2003, p. 3). In addition, it promotes non-violence, a just society, right relationships and advances the importance of dialogue. Political parties have a major role in applying these principles and tenets especially in diverse and divided societies.

Political parties are historically known as important element of any democracy. As a result of their function which includes “representation, interest aggregation and articulation, recruitment of electoral candidates and the formation of government” (Hoove, Scholtbach, & Maul-Phillips, 2008, p. 16), they are an integral part of any democratic society. On that basis, their “role cannot be duplicated by any other civil society or private organisation” (Hoove et al., 2008, p. 26). In spite of their relevance, political parties are the “least trusted institutions” in the world according to the Global Barometer Surveys⁴ (Nordlund, 2008, p. 300). Ederber and Tjernstrom (2005/2006) argue that this lack of trust in political parties by the public is because the former are perceived as corrupt, elitist, and unresponsive to the needs of members and the general public from which they garner support. As Matlosa and Shale (2008, p. 14) argue, “the rise of other formations like civil societies as alternative forms of mobilisation and expression have decreased trust and reliance on political parties and shifted the arena of political engagement beyond political parties”. Furthermore, political parties are on the decline globally due to a myriad of factors: failed election promises, corruption, challenge in mobilising numbers, and poor public perception of political parties (Matlosa & Shale, 2008, p. 13-14). This global decline is also manifested in the decline in overall party memberships and poor support of the electoral process by citizens.

With regard to conflict, political parties are often complicit in electoral violence. Electoral violence has been defined as acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process, or that arises in the context of electoral competition (Ettang, Nzovu-Ouma, & Bakwesegha-Osula, 2011, p. 1). Another definition notes electoral conflict and violence as any random or organised act or threat to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail, or abuse a political stakeholder in seeking to determine, delay, or to otherwise influence an electoral process (Ettang et al., 2011, p. 1). Onwudiwe and Berwind-Dart (2011, p. 5) grouped election violence into four categories: intraparty feuding, interparty clashes, electoral-events violence, and communal unrest. The uses of militia for political ends, vote-buying and intimidation are the different manifestations of election related violence. Violence and intimidation negatively impact on elections as they contribute to low voter turnout thus infringing people’s right to freely choose their representatives. Similarly, electoral malpractices are commonly used to influence the voting process to produce a specific outcome. Omowumi and Sunday (2011, p. 3896) define electoral malpractices as “palpable illegalities committed with a corrupt, fraudulent or sinister intention to influence an election in favour of certain candidate(s) by means such as illegal voting, bribery, cheating and undue influence, intimidation and other acts of coercion exerted on voters, falsifications of results, fraudulent announcement of a defeated candidate as a winner with or without altering the recorded results”. Although political parties sometimes actively create and exacerbate electoral violence, they do have a strong role to play in positively transforming the causes and preventing violence.

In linking political parties to the conflict process, their ability to mobilise, unify and represent interests makes them a formidable force in managing divided societies (Reilly, 2006, p. 811). Against this backdrop, the international community has been involved in strengthening political parties through the following avenues: organisational development, ensuring effective campaigns, promotion of multi-party dialogue, and improved performance in parliament (Nordlund, 2008, p. 217). In pluralist countries like Nigeria where elections are often characterised by conflict and violence, the roles of political parties in reducing these conflicts cannot be underestimated. The next

⁴ See [<http://www.globalbarometers.org/>]

section explores the role of political parties as agents of conflict transformation with three goals in mind: reduction of violence, increasing justice, and resolving human relationships.

Reduction of Violence

Political parties, according to Reilly (2006, p. 811), are “intimately linked to the rise and fall of conflict in ethnically plural societies”. Looking at the case of Nigeria, political parties are popular for grossly influencing the elections process and more specifically incessant rigging during elections (Omotola, 2010, p. 138). Key institutions like Nigeria’s Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and ruling parties have engaged in electoral fraud and the manipulation of votes thereby going against the democratic rights and freedoms of Nigerians (Casimir, Omeh, & Ike, 2013). On the basis of their actions, they contribute to violence during elections. This is done through voter intimidation where individuals or groups are threatened if they vote for a particular individual or party, attacks are carried out on polling stations to dissuade people from voting for a particular individual or party, legal threats of imprisonment and economic threats were employers face the possibility of disciplinary action if they vote a certain way (Casimir et al., 2013). Their role in increasing tensions and providing resources for conflict needs to be reversed in order to contribute positively to societal development.

In reducing violence, political parties must engage in a process of understanding the root causes of any conflict. This requires an active and on-going engagement with the citizens to understand the needs and demands on the ground and ensure they are channelled into policy. In addition, cross ethnic party voting has been identified as a form of preventing violent conflicts (Miall, 2004, p. 4). This is why Reilly (2006, p. 811) notes that ethnically based parties are usually inclined towards representing the interests of specific groupings. On this basis, ethnic parties are often direct contributors to violent conflict. In attempting to address these, political parties must be multi-ethnic and cater to all forms of identities. Furthermore, political parties must engage warring groups in finding peaceful and sustainable solutions to conflict before they escalate. This responsibility must not be solely left to government or civil society.

Political parties, in engaging with civil society, can participate in conflict prevention strategies and support early warning and early response processes particularly during election periods. In aspects of conflict prevention, political parties must publicly denounce violence of all forms and ensure that they do not engage in “violence or intimidation, or language or action which might lead to violence or intimidation” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008, p. 73). South Africa has made an important stride in this regard whereby parties have committed to not allowing “weapons to be carried or displayed at political meetings, marches, demonstrations and voting stations” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008, p. 73). In prevention and early warning and response, political parties could form part of community level committees focused on preventing and intervening in electoral disputes before they escalate. In addition, political parties can adhere to the electoral code of conduct, and allow the rule of law and the judicial structures to resolve any disputes arising from elections. Political parties in contributing to prevention should commit to these processes and abide by the rule of law in cases of disputes. It must be noted that the involvement of political parties in conflict prevention and early warning and response could be hampered by poor or non-existing relationships between them and civil society. For the most part, the relationships between civil society and political parties are weak and sometimes non-existent particularly within the context of elections (Matlosa & Shale, 2008). This could be attributed to the existence of strong mutual distrust between both groups.

Borrowing from Kumar Kumar and De Zeeuw (2008), they propose that party rules and regulations should be developed and implemented through the conflict prevention lens. In doing this, their ideologies, actions, platforms and agendas must be conflict sensitive and their approach must be cognisant of the realities on the ground as well as the possible triggers for violence in society. Furthermore, they can “identify the rules and regulations that might aggravate existing tensions and present alternative solutions for the consideration of the executive and legislative bodies” (Kumar & De Zeeuw, 2008).

Efforts to mitigate and prevent election related violence must be started sufficiently ahead of elections. Political parties must be involved in conflict prevention education, fostering unity, and calling for nonviolence before, during and after elections. Furthermore they can contribute to creating forums of dialogue and engagement with citizens to ensure that their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed in order to avoid any election violence. Political parties must embrace a culture of non-violence and protracted and violent in-fighting must be avoided within parties. The portrayal of constant violence, divisions, and in-party fighting will reflect poorly on society. Intra-party dialogue is a useful approach in reducing violence as it creates opportunities for political parties to sit together and resolve issues of discord and possible violence. This requires developing conflict resolution and mediation channels within political parties and ensuring that internal processes are transparent and inclusive.

Political parties can benefit from reducing violence through various means. For instance, they can be assured of a stable and peaceful environment before, during and after elections which will allow them to effectively campaign and promote their agenda. Furthermore, their constituents and party workers are protected from attack or harm during elections and polling stations will be safer which will in turn increase voter turnout.

Increasing Justice

Conflict emerges when people feel they have been wronged or economically marginalised or excluded from political processes. In many instances, long-held grievances are neglected over time by existing structures like the state. In contributing to this, political parties in various instances have “struggled to manage societal conflicts, failed to deliver public goods and promote development” (Reilly cited in Omotola, 2010, p. 130). In response to the failure of the state and political parties in addressing these needs, citizens confront (sometimes violently) this unjust system.

In limiting these systems of exclusion, marginalisation and neglect, political parties, especially in divided, post-conflict societies are expected to “promote maximal inclusiveness and representation of various groups” (Hoove et al., 2008, p. 11). In increasing justice, political parties must call for and actively engage in a process that requires the involvement of the population. This is why political parties have been referred to as “critical agents for political education, socialisation and mobilisation” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008, p. 6). Their influence in pressuring governments to meet the needs of all groups and regions cannot be undermined. They are also important in driving and shaping the political landscape of a country to one of inclusivity and non-discrimination. Similarly their actions, ideologies and values can contribute to the national political culture which in turn could be positive or negative (Matlosa & Shale, 2008, p. 6).

In ensuring access and inclusive participation of all sectors of society, Kumar and De Zeeuw (2008, p. 281) propose an exploration of a wide range of rules and regulations that “create positive incentives for political parties to build multi-party coalitions and to include women, ethnic minorities, and members from remote and distant regions within their organisation”. This might contribute to the inclusion of all sectors of society (including women, youth, and ethnic/religious minorities) in the political process and an assurance that their voices are being heard. Other spaces through which these groups can participate in decision-making must be created particularly within political party systems. This is of paramount importance in Africa where youth are largely unemployed and have been known to actively engage in conflict. Efforts to include them in political decision-making and ensuring that their voices are not only heard but are also included in key processes will be of extreme importance in conflict prevention.

In increasing justice, political parties should encourage and support the shift from one-party politics to a functioning multi-party system. Furthermore weaker political parties must be strengthened to actively engage in the political process. One-party government, supported by corruption and characterised by the incessant abuse of power and access to state resources by one political party produces a fragile and weak system of governance. As a result, only specific groups tend to benefit from this system. This also results in increased inter-party clashes and the use of violent methods by the opposition, to weaken the dominant party.

Ideally political parties should be relied upon to increase government accountability “by effectively implementing party policies and exercising control over government administration” (Omotola, 2010, p. 129). In doing so, programmes and measures must be put in place by political parties to ensure that government is addressing the needs of the population regardless of their identity. Its role therefore must go beyond pushing its agenda during elections to actively engaging the political process on an on-going basis to and erase processes that lead to social, political and economic marginalisation. Citing Reilly, Omotola (2010, p. 129) notes that political parties should “mediate between the demands of the citizenry on the one hand and the actions of the government on the other, aggregating the diverse demands of the electorate into coherent public policy”. Accountability is enhanced through this as public needs are channelled into policy-making and implementation. This requires an on-going engagement in the public arena and more importantly in countries undergoing transition or facing potential conflicts. On another note, representatives of political parties should not engage in corruption whilst in government and should call for stronger enforcement of anti-corruption laws.

Political parties must become as they were designed; platforms through which the interests of the people are aggregated and presented to government (Nordlund, 2008). Public outreaches become very important avenues through which political parties can engage more closely with the population and help to transform conflicts. Furthermore, political parties should extend their engagement with the public beyond election periods (Matlosa & Shale, 2008, p. 39). In increasing its access to the population, political parties should ensure that “they interact with

members, have offices at the provincial, district and local levels, hold public hearings with citizens, and ensure that party information is easily accessible” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008, p. 39).

Political parties are ideally meant to represent and channel the interests of the population to become policy. Representation could be defined as “the capacity of political parties to respond to and articulate the views of both members and the voters” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008, p. 5). Their roles, especially during elections, range from “political representation, expression of people’s demands through interest articulation and aggregation and the simplification and structuring of electoral choice” (Omotola, 2010, p. 129). But as Omotola (2010) posits, political parties in Africa have not lived up to their definitions as they have failed to sufficiently represent various groups in society. They have been known to push forward agendas of “neo-patrimonialism and violence” (Omotola, 2010, p. 129).

The emergence of ethnic political parties has been seen as threats to peace and political stability. This is because such parties are often exclusive and are organised along narrow ethnic primordial ideologies which can be a base for conflict and violence (Kumar & De Zeeuw, 2008, p. 265). In reaction to this, governments in countries such as Afghanistan and Rwanda have banned the emergence of parties that promote specific ethnic interests, although this strategy has however been criticised in Rwanda as a hindrance to the emergence of solid opposition parties. Because of this, the perception of political parties have been tainted and in many cases they are seen or perceived as oligarchic, power-hungry and devoid of interest of their members or the communities they supposedly “represent” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008 p. 14).

In conclusion, contributing efforts to increase justice requires that memberships in political parties are open to all identities and that key positions of leadership are representative of various groups and is based on merit. Furthermore political parties should create systems through which they can meet the needs and demands of their members for true representation and inclusivity. In addition, they must ensure that their members, regardless of their identity, will benefit from the political process. This will result in institutions that are transparent in the policies and decisions that affect the population. Political parties can then become less “ceremonial” but become active checks and balances on government.

Resolve Human Relationships

Poor relationships (characterised by mistrust, competition over scarce resources, and ethnic allegiances) between different groups have been identified as a catalyst for conflict that could hinder efforts at establishing peace and stability (Lederach cited in Miall, 2004, p. 8). Taking cognizance of this, Omotola (2010, p. 125) observes that political parties are avenues for “national integration and consensus building especially in plural societies like Nigeria”. Unfortunately, citizens’ trust in political parties has weakened considerably which makes them unfit to push forward ideas of integration, unity or consensus. The lack of trust in these political parties has brought about declining membership rates, weak support during elections and low voter turn-out. This trust has been further weakened by the failure of incumbents to meet election promises. The current decline in political parties could also be attributed to their “bureaucratized political machines concerned only with contestations for state power with no sustained mobilisation and activism of their grass-roots members” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008 p. 14). Political parties must therefore work actively to repair their image (real or perceived) in society. This involves developing positive inter-party and intra-party relationships.

Furthermore, civic education is a useful tool in resolving relationships. Civic education programmes can expose citizens to election processes, the principles of democracy, promotion of non-violence and building unity during and after elections. Civic education can benefit from the support and involvement of political parties. Yet, political parties often see this as the role of the state and civil societies (Matlosa & Shale, 2008 p. 23). It is rather rare for political parties to engage in civic education and the challenge is that efforts by other actors to undertake these activities are limited by lack of financial resources. Thus a huge gap exists in conducting widespread civic education programmes. Recognising the values of civic education, Matlosa and Shale (2008, p. 23) argue that it is “politically costly for parties to fail to undertake civic and voter education”.

This article argues that efforts be made towards transforming the image of political parties including the need for the improvement in the relationship between the population and political parties. As Matlosa and Shale (2008, p. 139) note “political parties are not sufficiently rooted in any society which allows party financiers to hijack the parties for personal interests”. What has emerged has been the creation of political parties by financiers and entrepreneurs with the sole purpose of accessing political and economic resources (Jeffrey, 2008). Consequently, such political parties rely on clientelism and intimidation in order to remain in power. This creates a culture that leads to the pilfering of

state resources. To this end, the article advances the need for concrete steps to be put in place towards creating broad based political parties with agendas that promote and practice inclusivity and grassroots engagement.

Resolving human relationships and building consensus within society should be of importance to political parties as it lessens factions within such a highly competitive process. Furthermore, stronger inter- and intra-party relationships will contribute to a vibrant and positive political environment. Ultimately political parties, in ensuring the loyalty of their constituents, must attempt to create a positive image.

Africa's Unending Quest for Democratic Consolidation

The mid 1970s to early 1990s witnessed the burgeoning of newly democratised societies. The rapid transition to democracy was epitomised in what (Huntington, 1991) dubbed the "Third Wave"⁵. In Africa, the Third Wave was characterised by the end of dictatorial regimes and multiparty elections (Manning, 2005). The transition to democracy was hailed as a milestone in the history of the continent. Among other things, it was hoped that the transition will bring to an end, the socio-economic and political woes that had become the defining features of the continent. By creating a stable environment and institutionalising the rule of law, it was anticipated that democracy will promote the continent's economic growth, deepen social integration and foster human development.

In the mid to late 1990s, the excitements that characterised the Third Wave began to wane as evidenced in the sharp decrease in the number of countries with liberal democratic systems. Given the lack of consolidation of the gains of democracy in many African countries (Diamond, 1997), previously democratic societies across the continent transitioned to pseudo-democracies across the continent during this period. The existence of pseudo-democracies has not abated in recent years given the persistent and equally unstable political climates in countries such as Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Kenya (Macharia, 2012; Scarnecchia, 2008). Political parties, in many of these countries, were dominated by personal, regional or ethnic issues at the expense of the national agenda (Omotola, 2010, p. 130). The outcome of the foregoing is that the gains of democracy have not trickled down to the populace. Undemocratic practices, such as vote-buying, political intimidation and assassinations, and violent ethno-regional and ethno-religious conflicts, have resulted in a number of military putsches in Africa in recent years, (such as the ones that have occurred in Mauritania, Mali, Guinea and Niger (Okem, 2014). There has also been an increase in the number of African countries that are deemed either as failed states – e.g. Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Chad, and Zimbabwe – or gravitating towards becoming failed states – e.g. Nigeria – (Okem, 2014).⁶

According to the Failed State Index, six African countries – Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Chad, and Zimbabwe –were among the top ten failed states in 2012. Nigeria, like many newly democratic societies, has equally been faced by a number of challenges. The country is confronted by increasing violent conflicts. This situation has further been aggravated by the intractable terrorist activities of Boko Haram, vandalisation of oil and gas installations by the Niger Delta Militant Groups, kidnappings and demands for ransom as well as increasing spates of armed robbery. Additionally, the on-going violence, coupled with dilapidating infrastructure and high levels of corruption have stunted the country's economic growth and reduced citizens' quality of life (Okem, 2013).

Since independence, Nigeria has oscillated between democratic regimes and military dictatorship. Nearly half of the country's independence era was under military rule (Guseh & Oritsejafor, 2007). In addition, the country's history has been punctuated by violent conflicts which often have ethno-regional and religious undertones. The civil war of 1967 to 1970, which pitted the Hausa-Fulani of the North against those of the Southern Igbo extraction in their bid for an independent Biafra Republic, is a veritable depiction of the country's division. Forty years after the war, the socio-economic and political imperatives that gave rise to the civil war have not abated. Primordial ethnic sentiments coloured by religious regional cleavages continue to thwart efforts to construct a shared citizenship (Agbibo & Okem, 2011). This fragmentation makes one wonder how long the 'marriage of convenience' of the various segments of the country will last. Nowhere is the division more apparent than in contestations for political positions. As a multiparty democracy, political parties in Nigeria play invaluable roles in these contestations.

⁵ Huntington (1991) defines democratization wave as "a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period"

⁶ The Failed State Index (FSI) which uses a number of socio-economic indicators to rank countries in terms of their stability six African countries among the top ten failed states in 2012

Historicising Nigeria's Political Party Landscape

In Nigeria, the origin of political parties like many other African countries, dates back to the colonial period when people organised themselves into social groupings to oppose the British imperial rule (Jinadu, 2010). These early political parties in the country had a nationalist outlook. This is evident in the constitution of prominent political parties in this era.⁷ In post-colonial Nigeria, political parties developed strong regional and ethnic orientations. These ethnic and regional orientations underscores the continued contestation for dominance among the various ethnic groups brought together to form Nigeria by the 1914 Amalgamation Policy of Lord Lugard. It is, therefore, no wonder that Jinadu (2010) argues that ethnicity "is a major element of the country's social structure, which has had a profound impact on the origins and developmental trajectory of political parties in Nigeria, and on the practice of federalism in the country".

Over the years, various political parties and social organisations in Nigeria have continued to mirror regional and ethnic sentiments. The Action Group (AG), formed in 1951, for example, was essentially a Pan-Yoruba organisation dedicated to advancing the collective interests of the Yoruba nation. Similarly, the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) formed in 1949, which was previously a cultural organisation, metamorphosed into a political party dedicated to people of Hausa-Fulani extraction. This party was based on the philosophy of "One North, One Destiny and One God" (Jinadu, 2010). Other parties which demonstrated commitments to regional cleavages include the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) – which began with a national outlook but later became focused on advancing the interest of those from the eastern part of the country (Jinadu, 2010).

It is perhaps worthy to note that even in 2013, a number of political parties in Nigeria's political environment have continued to manifest these regional and ethnic orientations. For example, of the five major political parties in the country, only the Peoples' Democratic Party could boast of being a truly national party. Parties such as the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), and the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) all have regional and ethnic outlook and orientation.⁸

Given the divisive nature of Nigeria's politics and political parties, the regime of Ibrahim Babangida in 1991 formed and imposed two political parties – the National Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP) – on Nigerians (Omotola, 2009). By insisting on the existence of two political parties, it was hoped, that the ethnic and regional cleavages that often punctuate politicking in Nigeria will be greatly reduced. Unfortunately, the annulment of the 1993 general elections – judged as the freest and fairest in the history of Nigeria – prevented the materialisation of the aspirations of the reengineering of political parties. The annulment of the elections saw a brief interim government which was removed by a military coup led by General Sani Abacha., Abacha died an untimely death under questionable circumstances, after about five years in power.

In 1999, Nigeria made a peaceful transition to democracy. The election of the former military leader, Olusegun Obasanjo, as the country's civilian president under PDP was seen as a respite from years of brutal military dictatorship. Unfortunately the optimism never translated into the creation of a peaceful and stable democratic regime. Instead, the eight years of Obasanjo's regime was characterised by corruption (Ojukwu & Shopeju, 2010), election-related conflicts (Ibrahim, 2009) as well as regional and ethnic violence (Kurtenbach, 2008) which stunted the country's development.

Overview of Party Politics and Election Related Violence in Nigeria

Over the years, Nigerians have lived with the painful reality that election is by no means a medium for electing their political representatives (Omowumi & Sunday, 2011). This is as a result of irregularities/malpractice, tensions and related violence that have come to define Nigeria's elections. For instance, the PDP has faced its own challenges of in-fighting in the form of power struggles between various individuals in 2010, thus leading to the suspension of members who were "challenging the party's leadership over a lack of openness in selecting candidates for political office"⁹. Intra-party relations are very poor such that intra-party conflicts have become permanently irreparable or

⁷ See Jinadu (2010) for a comprehensive list of these parties

⁸ Nigeria's major opposition parties recently came together to float a mega party; the All Progressive Congress (APC) with a view to uniting the disparate opposition parties, (Umoru, Ochayi, Agbakwuru, & Ewepu, 2013). The goal of the merger is to provide a viable opposition to the Peoples' Democratic Party

⁹ See, New York Times, "Ruling Party in Nigeria Is Fractured by Infighting", Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/world/africa/24nigeria.html?_r=0 (Accessed 18th February, 2013).

non-existent as in the case of Nigeria (Omotola, 2010, p. 142). An offshoot of poor inter-party relations is the prevalence of competition, actions and behaviours that causes tensions in society as the wider population is drawn into these identity wars. Party politics has seen a shift of the agenda from ideological discussions and reflections to that of a zero-sum competition. This is evident in the fierce competition for victory at the polls alluded to earlier on in this article. Against this backdrop, political parties have become more of a “liability than an asset to the common man and the system at large” (Omotola, 2010, p. 141).

In a country like Nigeria, competition has resulted into violent identity conflicts or electoral violence. Identity conflicts in Nigeria have been mainly ethno-religious in nature. Ethno-religious violence emerges when structures contribute to social and economic inequities and to the systematic exclusion of ethnic or religious groups from participating in public policy decisions (Schirch, 2008). Thus in the country, election periods are often prone to violent conflict. This is because politicking in the county, now construed as contestations for a slice of the ‘national cake’, are carried out by vested interests that use violence as a means of achieving their political ends. The huge ‘return on investment’ in political officers, seem to have incentivised the emergence of a new political elite popularly called political godfathers (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011). In a bid to ensure that they get their candidate into political office in order to get their return on investment, political godfathers, rig elections, recruit thugs and arm them with sophisticated weapons to intimidate and assassinate political opponents. A country report by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) from research and dialogue with political parties in Nigeria noted that although formal procedures are in place for the election of party leaders, these are disregarded time and again as the godfathers determine the outcomes of the selection processes (Nordlund, Ibrahim, Okoye, & Adambara, 2011). While nominations and election are conducted, outcomes are “pre-determined and party bosses tend to have the final say in the selection of leaders (Nordlund et al., 2011),. High unemployment in the country has ensured that young energetic people become easy targets as recruits to be used as political thugs to prosecute the wishes of godfathers (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2011)

Over the years, Nigeria has witnessed cases of high profile assassinations including the assassination of Barnabas Igwe the Attorney General of the Federation at the time of his assassination, the Chairman of the Nigerian Bar Association Onitsha Branch and his wife on September 1, 2002, Prophet Eddie Okeke in November 2000, Chief Ezeodumegwu G. Umegwu G. Okonkwo a chairman of a local government in February 2001, and Marshall Harry – the national Vice Chairman for the South-South Zone of All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) on March 5, 2003 (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Cases like these attest to the fact that political violence creates a culture of fear thus preventing well-meaning aspirants from venturing into politics. Consequently, Nigeria’s political elite is characterised by a group of thugs who are motivated only by self-serving interests (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011). It is therefore not surprising that corruption, intimidation, and violence have become normal processes of elections and electioneering in Nigeria.

The foregoing has created a dangerous precedent where politics in Nigeria has become a “do or die”¹⁰ affair – a term popularised by Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Nigerian president in the build-up to the 2007 elections (Isumonah, 2012). Given this warped notion of elections, political aspirants and parties resort to all forms of illegality to ensure that they are declared winners at the polls. It is therefore no surprise that elections in Nigeria, such as the ones in 2007, featured “widespread disregard to non-disclosure of secrecy in balloting, vandalism, stealing, snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes by political thugs for their candidates and party stalwarts and the alteration of results during collation process” (Iduh, 2011, p. 124). Casimir et al. (2013) note that until 2011, the electoral laws in Nigeria turned a “blind eye” to high levels of rigging, the culture of impunity with regards to violence all as a result of the manipulation by political elite.

In addition, election related violence is contributing to the proliferation of light and heavy weapons. In preparing for elections, political aspirants invest heavily in amassing weapons, such that one may be forced to think they are preparing for a military offensive. In the build-up to the general elections in 2011, for instance, the country’s security officers “intercepted thirteen shipping containers of smuggled weaponry at the Lagos port in what many analysts consider an ominous portent for that year’s election season” (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2011, p. 4) in October 2010. Such weapons, after elections, become readily available for use by terrorists groups, armed robbers and kidnapers thus increasing human insecurity in the country.

⁹ See [<http://www.globalbarometers.org/>]

¹⁰ According to Omowumi and Sunday (2011, p. 3895), “Do or die” refers to the readiness of a politician to use all means, any means including diabolical, manipulative, violent and criminal means to ensure victory in an election.”

Vote rigging and election related violence are also not new features of the Nigerian political terrain. A relevant case in point was the 1965 elections in the Old Western Region, where electoral officers were reported to have colluded with a certain political party, with close affinity with the government and rigged elections result in its favour (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011). The subsequent dissatisfaction with the outcome of the rigged elections created an unstable political space which brought about the 1966 military putsch led by General Kaduna Nzeogwu. The 1979 and the 1983 elections were also not much different from that of 1965. Again, dissatisfaction with the outcomes of these elections created the unfavourable political climate which culminated in the military takeover that year (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011).

At the heart of political violence in Nigeria is the multi-ethnic composition of the country. Mono-ethnic political parties, grounded on ethnic ideology, often exacerbate social fractures in multi-ethnic societies (Reilly, 2006). In such societies, politicking rather than being issue-based is underpinned by ethnic differences. By mobilising voters along ethnic lines, such a political party “has a centrifugal effect on electoral politics, thereby aiding extremists and heightening ethnic tensions” (Reilly, 2006, p. 811). In addition, these political parties are often exclusive thus becoming breeding grounds for the development of dislike for other ethnic groups.

Fractures among the population along ethnic lines assure political parties of the allegiance of their ethnic groups. In this regard, such political parties are known for making “powerful emotional appeal to issues of identity, history and survival” (Reilly, 2006, p. 813). It is therefore not surprising that in Nigeria political elites and civilians form alliances “along expedient lines of convenience, ethnicity, and religion” (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2011, p. 22). As a result, leaders are elected not because of their pedigree but because of a sense of primordial attachment. While the above holds true for many instances, it is worth pointing out that ethnic political parties are not necessarily divisive or necessarily exclusive. In a federation like Nigeria, the formation of political parties along ethnic/regional lines could act as a means of including minority groups in a coalition government.

Unlike mono-ethnic parties, Reilly (2006) argues that multi-ethnic parties¹¹ tend to promote national integration. They do this by appealing to voters from different ethnic backgrounds. Through this, electioneering itself becomes a channel of social cohesion by promoting a culture of tolerance. In multi-ethnic political parties, people from different ethnic backgrounds can work together in order to widen the party’s political base. This has the capacity to douse ethnic tensions that would otherwise degenerate into violent conflict.

Returning to a broader discussion, the general elections coming up in 2015 has already created dissent within and among political parties. The political environment in the lead up to the elections is already defined by power struggles, manipulation of political actors in efforts to ensure victory, allusions of violence, accusations of assassination attempts, all playing out between the two main political parties the - PDP and the All Progressives Congress (APC) (Igbokwe, 2014). Based on this, security during the elections is of utmost priority and equally important is that the roles of actors like political parties, security agencies, INEC, and the Ministry of Justice are clarified before, during and after the elections (Udejah, 2014). These examples and a review of Nigerian newspapers attest to the significance of political parties in exacerbating tensions and inciting violence based on their actions and words. The intensity and gravity of the situation requires that efforts are geared towards political party reform not just in the short term but for the long term. The stability and peace of Nigeria depends on it.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Ideally, political parties are pillars of democracy and have a huge role to play in ensuring political stability. Nigeria’s political history has contributed to the evolution of political parties as representatives of specific personal or group interests and not that of society as a whole. As of 2010, Nigeria had over fifty registered political parties, which ideally should create an avenue for a deeper and more participatory democracy, however the opposite seems to be the case. Its political parties have evolved more as representing and consolidating specific ethno-regional interests. This has made them weak actors in promoting democracy and mitigating conflicts. Regrettably, political parties in Nigeria, through their activities, have become rather anti-politics.

This article submits that political parties in multi-ethnic and religious societies must evolve to embrace and resolve their differences. Ideological differences, political competition as well as wide economic disparities amongst groups create a highly tense and conflicting environment. Political parties can either contribute to deepening these differences or try to bridge the gap among the citizens and between the governed and government. Political parties

¹¹ By multi-ethnic party, we refer to political parties whose purpose of existence is not based on promoting the values and needs of a single ethnic group but that of the broader society.

are encouraged to not only focus on promoting their agenda but also devising peaceful means of doing so. In addition, the engagement and involvement of political parties should not only be during and after elections but should be on-going, particularly in countries with nascent or transitional democracies.

As Reilly (2006, p. 812) earlier suggests, political parties need to explore and devise strategies through which multi-ethnic parties can be created and sustained. This is necessary because any political party that encourages and fosters multi-identity parties ultimately contributes to the reduction of violence and restoration of relationships in divided societies. It is important that the authoritarian legacies that have contributed to one-party systems over time be removed and measures put in place to shape multi-party democracy. Developing internal codes of conducts that govern the internal relations of political parties is essential so that they embrace and foster broad based and multi-ethnic arrangements. Furthermore there is a need to develop a system that ensures transparency in the funding sources of political parties. This is capable of eliminating or reducing the use of state resources to sustain the status of a dominant political party at the expense of the development of meaningful opposition.

Political party leadership are very important in promoting a culture of nonviolence, embracing diversity and restoring relationships within the party, across parties and within the society at large. Sadly, the elites often fail to show interests in initiatives such as inter-party dialogues and party cooperation. This attitude needs to be changed and parties must embrace the culture of dialogue. In promoting accommodation, Kumar and De Zeeuw (2008, p. 816) states that campaigning politicians must “reach out and attract votes from ethnic groups other than their own”. Beyond this, there is a need for political leadership that is “nationalistic, detribalised and sacrificial” (Omotola, 2010, p. 144) in which the interests of society at large becomes paramount. These positive traits and values can in turn be positively reflected and relayed onto society.

Transforming political parties to become effective peace builders requires an “explicit intervention in the party system”. According to Reilly (2006, p. 823). This calls for continuous engagement and renewal of their agendas and platforms to become more formalised than patrimonial. In achieving this, the institutionalisation of political parties needs to be revisited and improved. This requires a reworking of their “organization, discipline, internal democracy and cohesion” (Mainwaring and Zoco cited in Omotola, 2010, p. 129). Unless these issues are prioritized, it is our belief, and as similarly expressed in Omotola (2010, p. 129), “political parties will become “mere formalities” and ceremonial features at best. According to Reilly (2006, p. 823), the capacity of political parties to effectively manage (and in this case transform) conflict, can only be determined by “the nature of the party system in a country and the structure of individual parties”. To this end, political parties should be re-engineered and reconstructed to reduce violence, increase justice and resolve relationships rather than endanger them.

In re-engineering themselves to become agents of conflict transformation, political parties must be informed and sensitive of their role in exacerbating conflict and contributing to divided societies. Furthermore they must be aware of and understand the root causes of conflicts in society and adopt measures through which they can address these or propel government, the security sector and other key stakeholders to address these. Stronger coordination between political parties and civil society is important in adequately and efficiently representing the interests of the population. Civil society organisations as representatives of the people are very important in helping to rebuild the relationship and bridge the gap between political parties and citizens. They can be relied upon for mobilisation, sensitisation, and educating the population. Such collaboration is beneficial in the long run and will ensure that the checks and balances on the ruling party or government are tougher.

Improving relations within and amongst political parties is also very critical in ensuring that they reach their potential. Multi-party dialogues are important in this process. The lack of trust and fragmented relationships amongst political parties and fragmentation amongst political parties impedes any efforts at a healthy political landscape. With the absence of trust comes an “unwillingness to share ideas and seek consensus and mutual understanding on a wide range of issues”. According to (Hoove et al., 2008, p. 16), all these are detrimental to a rich multi-party system. This article therefore advocates for the development of a common agenda sufficient enough to address causes of conflict and find avenues to successfully resolve them. A culture of trust and mutual understanding amongst political parties is critical to the success of this agenda.

Generally, political parties wield important power in Nigeria and their influence must be channelled appropriately to actively and constructively meet the needs of citizens. Thus it is advised that the character of the Nigerian state which allows for the centralisation of power and resources needs to be revisited. The competition for the centre has trickled down to affect the very nature and make-up of political parties in Nigeria. To this end, it is hoped that a decongestion of the centre will help in addressing some of these deficits.

It can be agreed upon that transforming societies susceptible to violent conflict to peaceful ones does not lie solely with government, civil society or the population. Political parties are central to the discussion, not only for the role they play in inciting violence but because they link these three critical groups: government, civil society and the population together, especially during elections. Thus they are suitably placed to work with all sectors and ensure that peaceful processes are upheld during fragile election periods. On that note however, it is important to assert that their role goes beyond the electoral period, as they can equally play an essential role in on-going conflict prevention and conflict transformation processes. Ultimately the embracement and application of conflict transformation by political parties in Africa as a whole will in turn produce stronger and more stable countries and equally contribute to the economic growth of the continent.

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