

The Trend of Opposition Political Parties in Sustaining Democracy

A Comparative Study of Nigeria and Malaysia

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Abstract—*Democratisation wave is a global phenomenon that cuts across countries within the international system. Democracy has become an acceptable system of government which is believed to be the hope of the people. Nevertheless, the relevance of political parties in any democratic arrangement cannot be over-emphasised. Given this, the centrality of party politics to democratisation remains a pillar in nurturing democratic system. Political parties are the popular and legal avenue through which individuals contest elections in order to form a legitimate government. However, the interesting scenario in modern democratic societies particularly in developing countries is the trend and viability of opposition political parties in electoral contests. This makes it imperative in this study to explore the dynamism of opposition political parties in sustaining democracy of Nigeria and Malaysia. Both countries belong to the developing world where democratisation process has been faced with pro and cons. But the trend of opposition political parties challenging the ruling party has tremendously changed the political configuration of the two countries. Since the inception of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 after years of military regimes, opposition parties have actually challenged the monopoly of the ruling party (Peoples Democratic Party) to the extent that for the first time the country experienced electoral turnover that led to opposition (All Progressive Congress) defeating the incumbency in the last 2015 general elections. Similarly, the opposition political parties in Malaysia have proven to be a force to be reckon with by denying the ruling party (Barisan Nasional) two third majority in the parliament during the 2008 national elections. The 2013 general elections also recorded 51 percent popular votes for the opposition party (Pakatan Rakyat). With the aid of secondary data as source of information, the study infers that opposition parties in the two countries do not only serve as alternative to the ruling party but also strengthen democratic practise in the societies. Based on this, sustaining democracy is not a mirage.*

Keywords—*democratisation, political parties, opposition, ruling, elections, nigeria, malaysia*

I. INTRODUCTION

Political party is key to any electoral democracy. It remains the viable channel through which political transition is guaranteed via periodic and competitive elections. As rightly observed by Larry and Gunther, political parties are one of the core institutions of democracy [1]. Given this, political parties serve as tool through which elective positions can be vied for in a democratic system. However, considering the political background of Nigeria and Malaysia, it can be stated that both

countries share certain similarities and also have areas of diversities. Giving a brief overview of Nigeria, the country was a product of British colony and secured her political independence on October 1, 1960. Nigeria is located in Sub Sahara Africa with estimated population of 182 million [2]. Nigeria adopts Presidential System of Government and has 36 federating units plus the federal capital territory located in Abuja. The national legislative arrangement is bicameralism comprising of both upper (Senate) and lower (House of Representatives). The Nigeria's political history has witnessed series of military interventions, however, since 1999 till date, the country has been under democratic government. The constitution recognises multi-party system and currently Nigeria has 46 registered political parties [3].

On the other hand, Malaysia is located within the South East Asia and has estimated population of 31 million [4]. Malaysia also passed through British colonial era before her independence in 1957. Unlike Nigeria, the political system in Malaysia is Parliamentary System of Government and the country has 13 component units and the capital is situated at Putrajaya. Like her Nigeria counterpart, Malaysia operates bicameral legislation comprising of Dewan Rakyat (Lower House) and Dewan Negara (Upper House). However, members of the Dewan Rakyat are elected while Dewan Negara composition is done through appointment. Nevertheless, Malaysia enjoys political stability since independence and the ruling party remains Barisan Nasional (BN).

In lieu of this background, the focus of this study is to examine the trend of opposition parties in both countries within their democratisation processes. Based on that, the paper is divided into five segments. The first section introduces the subject of discourse while conceptualisation is captured in the second segment. The third section dwells into the nitty-gritty of the study by focusing on the role of opposition parties in the democratisation politics of Nigeria and Malaysia. The fourth aspect of the paper discusses the prospects and challenges of opposition parties in strengthening democracy in Nigeria and Malaysia while the fifth section which is concluding remarks makes recommendations for prospective democracy.

II. CONCEPTUALISING POLITICAL PARTIES

The contribution of political parties in any democratisation cannot be over-emphasised. Political parties are machineries or

platforms which politicians use in seeking for elective positions during electoral contests. According to Amuchaezi., the viability of political parties in any political system makes it critical for democratic governance [5]. To him, political party is an organised avenue for people to capture power via credible elections. In a similar perspective, the versatility of political party accords it to be the formidable channel through which people participate in politics [6]. By and large, political participation is easily strengthened through people's engagement in party politics.

Put differently, Manu and Ibrahim [7] see political party as an organised set of people with similar political ideology aimed at influencing public policy and most importantly to contest election in order to form a government. This simply pinpoints the role and function of political parties in a polity. Members of political parties are elected by the populace for representation at the government level. In as much direct democracy is not feasible in the modern societies, political parties are the most recognised platform through which individuals can seek popular votes required to win elective positions in a democratic system. Though some democracies legalised independent candidature to vie for elective posts, political parties often gain electorates' attention via party manifestoes.

However, depending on party politics and system applicable in different societies, political party might be one connoting one party system as obtainable in China and Cuba or two parties' arrangement as the case of United States of America. Although there are smaller political parties in the United States, the power and political configuration has been between Democratic Party and Republican Party. Also, in a multi-party system, the political structure allows several political parties to operate and this is often associated with liberal democracy that believes in universal adult suffrage [8]. In essence, political parties play two significant role in a political process; either to form a government or serve as opposition.

The idea of two party and multi-party system resuscitates an operation of alternative party giving room for opposition parties. Several countries have witnessed what Huntington refers to as 'Electoral Turnover' [9]. By electoral turnover, it is a political scenario whereby opposition party defeats ruling party in electoral contest. In fact, to Samuel P. Huntington, democratic consolidation can be easily ascertained, when a country experiences two turn over. It is against this backdrop that this study explore the dimension of opposition political parties in Nigeria and Malaysia contexts.

III. OPPOSITION PARTIES AND ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY: EXPLAINING THE NIGERIA AND MALAYSIA EXPERIENCE

The significant of opposition parties in a political setting paves way for alternation of power in some democracies and invariably checks the excesses of ruling parties in others. This prompts Dolo to tag opposition parties as partisan institutions that are designed to temper the ruling party's excesses while still pursuing legislative and executive offices [10]. Opposition parties must be viable to ensure flourishing of democracy. With this, electoral politics becomes more competitive and interesting. In fact, alternation of power has been eulogised in

many literature as one of the basic cornerstones of democratisation. Given this, since the inception of democratic dispensation in 1999 after Nigeria had been plunged with years of military authoritarianism, series of political parties have been formed strengthening the multi-party system in the country. However, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) which was formed in 1998 prior to the general elections of 1999 dominated the political scene of Nigeria for sixteen years. The party won four out of the five general elections conducted since Nigeria's return to democracy. Before the 2015 elections that were lost to the opposition, Nigeria's party politics was dominated by the People's Democratic Party particularly at the national levels.

However, the momentum and viability of opposition parties during the electioneering contest of the 2015 elections in Nigeria changed the present political configuration in the country. The dominance of the PDP was challenged by the coalition of four political parties that merged to form a formidable strong opposition. In the build up to the 2015 elections, the staggered opposition parties ranging from the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP) and a faction of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) agreed to form a mega party that would dislodge the PDP. This idea led to the establishment of the All Progressive Congress (APC) that successfully dislodged the PDP from power [11]. The APC further gained more momentum when some factional members of the PDP under the umbrella of New PDP joined the mega party and worked for the dislodgement of the ruling party from power. The political scenario of the 2015 elections remains a watershed in Nigeria and has both positive and negative implications on the country's democratisation. Positively, the emergence of APC widen the political scope of the country and for the first time, there was a real electoral competition. Also, with the slogan of 'change', the APC projected itself locally and internationally as the only party that could wrestle power from the PDP. Interestingly, the APC got massive supports from the populace and the electorates proved that by overwhelming votes. On the negative aspect, the tension, propaganda and hate speech that characterised the election campaign polarised the already divided country. In fact, the voting dimension and pattern re-enacted the dichotomy along ethnicity and religion in Nigeria [12].

On the other hand, Malaysia though yet to experience electoral turnover, the trend of opposition parties in the country's polity is gaining momentum. From the two last general elections (2008 and 2013), the opposition parties proved the readiness not only to checkmate the ruling party (*Barisan Nasional*) but to also seize power. This was justified with the outcome of the 12th and 13th general elections. The 12th general elections held in 2008 showcased setback for the ruling party to the extent of losing five states (Kedah, Kelantan, Perak, Penang and Selangor) to the oppositions [13]. The outcome of the 2008 general elections indicated that BN was denied majority votes paving way for the opposition to secure 51 percent while it settled for 49 percent. Although with massive support BN enjoyed from Sabah and Sarawak, it was able to get the simple majority at the parliament. Nevertheless, the opposition stripped the ruling party of two thirds majority

and assumed power in some states previously controlled by the BN [14].

Not only that, the experience of the 2008 general elections awoken political consciousness of the people with resounding hope for the opposition to defeat incumbent power. Given this, the 2013 elections were fiercely contested between the ruling party, *Barisan Nasional* and the strong opposition party, *Pakatan Rakyat*. Unlike the previous elections that were dominated with ethno-religious sentiment, the 2013 general elections salience such primordial outburst and ushered in Malaysia to the modern term of 'new politics' in the country. As rightly observed by Mohd Azizuddin and Ummu Atiyah, the 13th General Election in Malaysia exhibited all attributes of new politics. Substantiating this view, they pinpoint that the 2013 election was informed by two-party coalition, extensive social media role, large voters' turn out and issues based campaigns. In fact, it is viewed as mother of all elections [15]. By and large, the PR proved to be a strong opposition and performed tremendously by polling 51.4 percent of total votes cast. It was a shock to the BN to the extent that the Prime Minister, Najib Razak, lamented the hard fought polls which he ascribed to 'Chinese Tsunami' but this was debunked by the opposition. The PR did not deny the enormous support from the Chinese but attributed its performance to the masses' clamour for change which cut across the Malays, the Indians and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak [16]. This signalled a strong rejection across board. Although the BN managed to get the simple majority to control federal government, the chances of the opposition may be brighter cum 14th general elections.

IV. PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF OPPOSITION PARTIES IN NIGERIAN AND MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

Comparatively, the two countries have demonstrated an improved party politics making electoral politics to be more interesting. The common feature in the viability of the opposition parties in Nigeria and Malaysia is the coalition and alliance mode of operation. As applicable to Malaysia, Nigerians were opportune to have stronger opposition with the merger of four political parties that made up APC. In the previous exercises, the oppositions were staggered and could not break the monopoly of the PDP. But with the coalition syndrome that produced APC, power was wrestle from the dominant political party that ruled Nigeria for 16 years [17]. In the Malaysian context, the overwhelming victory or what Marzuki refers to as 'spectacular victory' by the BN in 2004 elections was challenged with the performance of the opposition party in 2008 and 2013 respectively [18]. Despite the fact that opposition is yet to capture the federal might (government), the prospect of power alternation might not be far - fetched when one considers the threat of opposition parties in Malaysian new politics.

Put differently, the opposition parties have contributed towards widening of political space in the above countries. In the case of Nigeria, the electoral turnover of the 2015 general elections that changed the country's political configuration was a product of electorates' commitment for change resulting to the changing of the ruling party (PDP) to opposition party. Such scenario empowers the populace to have options of

alternative platform if ruling party fails to deliver. Similarly, despite the inability of the PR to wrestle federal might from the BN, the record of defeating the latter in some of its strong holes proved electorates' resistance to traditional voting patterns.

However, the emergence of strong oppositions created room for political propaganda leading to dichotomy on ethnic rivalry. The 2015 elections like previous exercise were patterned on ethno-religious sentiment. The political campaigns arena was flooded with primordial and discriminative approach which endangered the diversity of Nigerians. It was tailored on North/ South dichotomy and Muslim/ Christen affiliations. Although the result of the South West geo-political zone proved otherwise, the phenomenon of ethnicity could not be jettisoned for proper analysis of the Nigeria's elections [19]. Like the instance of Nigeria, the verbal tussle aftermath the 2013 general elections among the stakeholders of BN and PR in Malaysia showcased the use of ethnicity as yardstick for the election results. The concept of 'Chinese Tsunami' as claimed by Najib Razak testifies to this. Though it has been perceived to be 'people tsunami' by some political analysts, the issue of ethnicity and religion remain variables in the electoral democracy of Malaysia.

V. CONCLUSION

The plight of this paper is to capture the significant of opposition parties in democratisation process of a society placing much emphasis on the Nigeria and Malaysia scenarios. Having highlighted the pros and cons of opposition parties in any democracy, it is pertinent to note that political elites often appeal to the electorates' conscience on some issues that could polarise a plural polity like Nigeria and Malaysia. But in as much as democracy needs to be sustained in the two countries, people should support parties on nationalistic and developmental basis rather than primordial sentiment. For any country to attain socio-economic and political development, national interest should not be jettisoned for ethnic favouritism. Based on this, the submission of this paper is to encourage multiparty arrangement that allows freedom, rule of law and above all national movement for the betterment of the larger societies.

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