
The Pathologies of Local Government Administration in Nigeria: A Critical Review of Introduction of Party Politics (1976-2011)

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Abstract

Local Governments in Nigeria were elevated to the status of a third tier level government following the 1976 Local Government Reforms in the country and the consequent inclusion in the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic. Also, following this elevation, local governments were assigned important functions in the Fifth Schedule of the 1979 Constitution and provisions made for its adequate funding from the monthly statutory allocations which as a result are now being shared between the Federal, State and Local Government. Similarly, as a result of the elevation, local governments were made the front-burner of rural development in the country. Unfortunately, with the introduction of party politics at this level of government in Nigeria in 1979, in spite of the elaborate provisions and the determination of the Federal Government to give teeth to local government administration, ideals did not approximate to reality, the success of local governments became a mirage, a shifting sand. The intentions of the status elevation, the ambitions of the local governments and the needs of the state governments did not converge. In fact, the divergence has become so great as a result of party politics, that it is now a chasm in need of a bridge. It is in the attempt to construct this required bridge to move local government administration in Nigeria to the next higher level that this study had taken a hard critical look at the effects of the introduction of party politics at this level of government in Nigeria from 1976 – 2011, with the view to find a way forward. The way forward based on our main findings that party politics at this level of government as ample concrete experiences have shown, are both disruptive and dysfunctional, is to recommend for insulation of local government administration in Nigeria, for now, from party politics and undue interferences from the politicians. This is the only rational and viable option for now through which the ideals of the famous 1976 Local Government Reforms and the aspirations of the founding fathers could be realized.

1. Introduction

Party Politics, according to Ekwueme Okoli (1980:38), has become a permanent feature of Nigerian local government system. The native administrations or local governments in his views have:

indeed been the forge and cradle that shaped and nurtured Nigerian political parties. Yet very little if any effort has been made to undertake a critical assessment of the role of party politics in the local government system in Nigeria.

The impact of party politics was felt most in the local government system in Nigeria with the introduction of the 1976 Local Government Reforms which were aimed, among other things, at democratization of the local government structure and activities. For example, the 1976 Local Government Reforms were principally intended:

- 1) To make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by devolving or delegating them to local representative bodies.
- 2) To make local self-government close to the local levels of society, and to encourage initiative and leadership potential.
- 3) To mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development.
- 4) To provide a two-way channel of communication between the local communities and government (both state and federal).
- 5) Above all, to make local government a third tier of government with enormous powers and responsibilities.

The implication of the 1976 Local Government Reforms is that it was intended "to stimulate democratic self-government and to encourage initiative and leadership potential" at the local level. Furthermore, it emphasized the fact that "it is only through an effective local government system that human and material resources could be mobilized for local government development."

Mobilization here implies more intimate connection between the government and the governed. The reforms, therefore, were intended to entrust political responsibility to where it is most crucial and most beneficial, that is, to the people. The government strongly hopes that through this means the principle of participatory democracy and of political responsibility extended to every Nigerian would further be reinforced.

The increased status of local government as a third tier of government coupled with enormous responsibilities and increased financial base provided the required and desired impetus for intensive party politics at the local level. The control of the local government apparatus was now seen as very crucial for electoral success of a political party because it provides the necessary grassroots base for effective control of the state and the federal government machineries. It is also important to mention that the introduction of participatory democracy and political responsibility at the local government level by the 1976 Reforms implies the development of parties, factions or groups. This is because the two *ideals*, that is, participatory democracy and political responsibility cannot be achieved without party politics. Furthermore, politics being essentially concerned with authoritative allocation of values must of necessity give rise to competing interests. Naturally in order to aggregate these interests organizations and groups must emerge to champion them.

The general concern of this work is to undertake a critical assessment of the role of party politics in the local government administration in Nigeria. The specific task or focus of the work is to examine the dysfunctional activities of political parties and the problems created by party politics in local government administration in Nigeria.

Local Government Administration and Party Politics in Nigeria

As observed by Ekwueme Okoli (1980:38) from the Lagos Town Council election of 1950, which was the first in Nigeria to be conducted on universal adult suffrage, the outcome of local government elections and the effective functioning of local government councils in Nigeria have depended largely on the political calculations of the parties involved. These calculations were not unconnected with plans to use the local government institutions as a springboard for party organization at the local, state and national levels. Also according to Amucheazi (1984:37), participation is widely accepted as one key condition as well as a measure of democratization of a political system.

The guidelines, not surprisingly therefore provided for election into councils which provision was amplified in Section 7.1 of the 1979 Constitution. Obviously such elections will be under party platforms.

Party politics in local government administration in Nigeria, as we can see, is not a new development. It is an old issue. The only thing new about politics in local government administration; or rather a recent development is its formal recognition by the guidelines for 1979 Local Government Reforms and the consequent entrenchment in the constitution as mentioned above.

Party politics in local government administration in Nigeria gained recognition and prominence with the introduction of the Richard's Constitution of 1946. Some reasons accounted for this important and significant development. The first reason which is regarded as *institutional* is the establishment by the Richard's Constitution of a "graduated system of indirect election based firmly and squarely on the native authority system then in force in Nigeria."

The second reason which is both *constitutional* and *organizational* in scope according to Ekwueme Okoli (1980:49) is that "it quickened the tempo of rural political awakening in two ways." The first is the agitation by the Nigerian nationalists which sent a wave of political consciousness throughout the length and breadth of Nigeria. The second is that, although the colonial government saw the wisdom of an early review of the Richard's Constitution, nevertheless its method of initiating review further politicized the rural areas; especially, the native authority system. For example, the review conferences were organized from the village; through the divisional and regional levels, to the final national review conference at Ibadan. The discussions and interactions incident on the review effort brought political awareness to the remotest parts of Nigeria. According to Ekwueme Okoli, quoting James Coleman:

There can be little doubt, that the method of constitutional revision did in fact give heavy weight to rural and traditional elements and minimized the influence of urban educated and nationalist elements.

Thus, the native authorities in Okoli's view

constituted the first step in the cursus honorum through which political aspirants advanced to the central legislature. They became, at the same time, the center and the hub of Nigerian political activities. Regrettably no attempt was made to ensure a healthy political socialization at the local level that would exert salutary influence on electoral contest at this level.

The candidates at this level were selected for the election on no party basis or what is sometimes referred to as *zero-party* form. The election was unstructured since there were no political parties to organize the contestants. As a result of the unstructured nature of the election, men of influence and affluence dominated the political scene. The political activities therefore were subject to their whims and caprices. The results of the election were subject to the dictates of these men of notables because of their superior economic, intellectual and traditional powers. According to Ekwueme Okoli,

These men of influence such as obas, chiefs and emirs based their power on the native authority institutions which they controlled as well as on a core of clientele.

Thus, local politics acquired, as a consequence, the following characteristics:

- (1) Local politics became personality-oriented and clientele in nature. Local notables such as emirs and obas played overriding role in determining the trend and the outcome of the election.
- (2) The introduction of limited franchise and the campaigns, emphasized the factional element in political contests. These contests unmediated by party discipline, party ideologies and party programmes accentuated personality conflicts and factional disputes at the local level.
- (3) Gradually, there developed both in the north and south a cadre of political activities maintained and sustained by material and psychic rewards. These rewards included sinecure offices and the power that associated with the ruling elite confers on the political activities. By degrees, these activities developed the feelings that might was right and that violence was a viable and valuable political weapon. Hence, not a few of them developed into armed men called thugs.
- (4) There was also a perceptible movement towards the democratization of the native authority system especially in the southern sections of the country. Even in the north conscious efforts were made to remedy the worst abuses of the native authority system. All these were done to make native authority system a viable avenue for channeling a measure of political power through the traditional elite.

Hence, according to Okoli,

in the east and west of the country, electoral college system was introduced. The system was divided into three stages of the primary, the intermediate and the final electoral college. Every one who wished to win election at the different levels must progress through election at the local government level.

In the north the electoral college was divided into four or five stages. At each stage, every effort was made to enhance the political power of the traditional elite who controlled the native authority system. Ekwueme Okoli, quoting Richard Sklar, emphasized this point as follows:

In the northern region special techniques were devised to weigh the vote in favour of the traditional and conservative elements in early elections. In 1951, every native authority, typically an Emir was permitted to nominate a number of persons equal to 22 percent of the final electoral college.

In the Macpherson Constitution this point was strongly emphasized, that is, any party which desired to win election at the regional level must develop a base at the local government level. In fact in certain regions and especially in the northern region, the native authority became an institutional arm of the party in power. Local government units became in fact, the cornerstone of the party political organization in Nigeria.

With the introduction of the local government reform of 1955 in the western and eastern regions, the electoral laws gave de jure recognition to the growing importance of party politics at the local government level. The law provided for methods of nomination of candidates and the procedure to be followed when two candidates have received equal number of votes at an election. According to Ekwueme Okoli,

a pointed reference was made to party politics in the western local government law. The law gave the minister of local government power to require a council to reassess its committee appointment and to include certain members of the opposition party if he was of the opinion that a particular committee had been packed.

In fact, Okoli, quoting Ronald Wraith, pointed out that:

The power of the majority party used to pervade every aspect of a council's life and work, even to the extent of compelling the council's employees to join the party under threat of dismissal.

This development is not just a peculiar feature of local government politics in the western region. It was a constant feature of party politics in local government throughout the country. It was a development which according to Okoli (1980:52), was inherent in the political system for the following reasons:

- 1) The electoral college system introduced under the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 made the native authorities the focal point of party political activities since all candidates to state and federal elective offices must first be nominated and elected at the local government level. The only exception was Lagos where election was on straight party platform. The control of the native authority (Local Government) became absolutely essential for any party or groups which aimed at winning a majority in any election.
- 2) The institutionalization of regional authority under the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 gave an accent to the regionalization of rights, loyalties and political power. The party in power in the region became in essence an extension of the government in power in that region. The civic duty to support the legitimate government in power became confounded with the citizen's right to support a party of his choice even at the local government level.

In the north, in particular, a majority of the party leaders were paid officials of the native authority system. Opposition to the party in power (NPC) therefore became synonymous with opposition to the whole native authority system. As Okoli, quoting Dudley asserted,

The party is, in fact, the native authority and whatever are its deficiencies, the native authority is nevertheless the central institutional reference point of social action for most, if not all northerners.

- 3) In the north as well as in the south, the party became in reality the native authority in all ramifications. In both sections the identification of the interest of the party with the interest of the native authorities was complete and unchallenged. This was necessarily so because the parties were to a surprising degree uninstitutionalized. As Okoli quoting Huntington remarked:

Institutionalization makes an organization more than an instrument to achieve certain purposes. Instead its leaders come to value it for its own sake, and it develops a life of its own quite apart from the specific functions it may perform at any given time. The organization triumphs over its function.

It is well known fact that the three major parties: the Action Group (AG), the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) were regionally based with the possible exception of the NCNC. These were established because the progressive devolution of power to the regions under the various constitutional experiments in pre-independent Nigeria necessitated the development of region-based parties.

Because of the exigencies of devolutionary regionalism, these parties could not transcend their original purpose of capturing regional power. This inability to triumph over their original purpose stifled their development as distinct political institutions. Consequently, they had to depend on the native authorities (local government) to legitimize and perpetuate their hold on the regional political institutions.

This tendency of political parties to crystallize around and capitalize on existing institutional structures was noted by the Willink Commission appointed to inquire into the fears of the minorities. The Commission according to Okoli (1980:54) observed, in passing, that

It can hardly be said too often that at the moment there is general struggle for power in Nigeria and that any group with corporate feeling can be the vehicle by which a politician reaches power; there is, therefore, a tendency on the part of the ambitious to work up party feeling where it was hardly formulated before.

Naturally, the native authority system was used by these groups as institutional base to bolster and broaden their hold on regional political power. This politicization of native authority had several serious consequences for the development of party politics at the local government level.

This situation above which was in Nigeria's First Republic was also applicable during the Second, Third and Fourth Republics (1979-date). In the Second Republic, party politics was very strong at the local government level. In fact for a party to control a state or produce its Governor, it must win 25 percent of the votes cast in at least two thirds of the local government areas. For example, according to E. C. Amucheazi (2012):

Some think that it is not possible or wise to isolate local councils from party politics. Political education, such people contend, ought to start with local government elections. In fact the demands of state politics seem to support such a view very strongly. The success or otherwise of a gubernatorial candidate is determined by his successes or failure in local government areas. To win, a candidate will not only score simple majority votes throughout the state but the votes must be spatially distributed among the local government areas that make up the state. He has to score at least 25 percent of the votes cast in at least two thirds of the local government areas. Thus the local government area is the unit of political organization of the political parties, by implication, and party control of the councils is one of exercising this control and thus winning over that local government area.

Thus, the local government in the Second Republic was also a centre for party politics. Party politics, therefore, has pervaded local government administration in Nigeria for a long time now. We are, therefore, concerned with examining the dysfunctional activities of political parties and the problems created by party politics in local government administration in Nigeria. This is what we intend to discuss next.

Dysfunctional Activities of Political Parties and the Problems Created by Party Politics in Local Government Administration in Nigeria

The introduction of party politics in local government administration in Nigeria has obvious negative consequences. As we all know political party activities are usually politicized and sensational in Nigeria. This often causes serious problems for the organizations concerned. This is the situation in most of the local governments where a trivial or insignificant issue is often politicized to the detriment of the whole community. As a result of party politics, it is usually difficult for the communities within a local government area to agree on any issue because they belong to different political parties. The members of the communities tend to defend their party interests and ideology. If a particular party is in power in a given local government the tendency is for all those who do not belong to the party to oppose the leadership of the local government. Similarly, the leadership of the local government in-turn extends privileges and services only to its supporters in the different communities. For example, according to Ekwueme Okoli, while discussing the negative effects of party politics in the local government administration in the First Republic observed:

... the influence of the dominant party over local government became so pervasive that even routine decisions such as staff appointments gave rise to inter-party struggles.

The observation of this phenomenon led Donald Wraith to comment with obvious impatience that:

It is difficult to suppose, for example, that there is a party political method of sweeping the market, cutting the grass and filling holes on the road; yet some small councils which have done little else have done it in an atmosphere of bitter political warfare.

Thus, party politics in local government administration in Nigeria breeds rancour, antagonism, hatred and destabilizing effects both within and outside the local government itself.

Party politics also breeds corruption within the local government administration. For example, the siting of importing development projects is not often based on rational and objective criteria. Such an important issue because of party politics, is treated with laxity and neglect. In fact such a serious issue is made to seem to be too little as to deserve an important attention. This fact was noted by Ekwueme Okoli:

Where the dominant party had an overriding majority even the most political sensitive issues as the siting of important development projects such as rural hospitals are treated as routine issues. Very frequently such decisions are imposed as party directives from government circles. The action of the local government being merely perfunctory exercise of giving effect to party directives.

The local government under party politics is in practice an extension of the party in power. The financial resources and other resources of the local government are often mobilized to sustain the party from losing control at the top. The chief executive of the local government is required to make some returns to the party, for the administrative running of the party. The party in power is entitled to a certain percentage of the contracts awarded in the local government. The local government chairman and the members of the council are encouraged to award contracts only to party members. This is a way of attracting members of the opposition parties and other new members into the party. Party politics in local government administration in Nigeria leads to serious distortion and destabilization of local government affairs and, therefore, dysfunctional to healthy development of the local communities.

Conclusion

Party politics in local government administration in Nigeria is not a healthy development. It compels the local governments to derail or abandon their cardinal objectives in preference to party programmes.

Party politics also breeds rancour, acrimony, violence, antagonism and disunity within the local government system. It tends to polarize the local communities. This creates problem to the local government in terms of effective mobilization of the communities for rural development projects. Furthermore, party politics breeds corruption within the local government. This is because it compels the chief executive of the local government to overlook certain guidelines in order to favour his party. It encourages fraudulent award of contracts and siting of local government projects on political consideration.

Based on the above negative consequences of party politics and dysfunctional activities of political parties in local government administration in Nigeria, we recommend a zero or non-party system as the basis for recruiting future political leaders in Nigeria for the local governments. Our recommendation is based also on the fact that the local governments are the hub or the hallmark for rural development in Nigeria. They have important functions which directly touch on the lives of the majority of the masses of Nigeria who are the rural dwellers. Most importantly too, Nigerians are yet to mature politically. Most of the politicians cannot differentiate between issues that are political and those that are not. Every issue tends to be political for the Nigerian politicians. This explains why they have so much politicized local government affairs in Nigeria to the extent that they have distorted its programmes and destabilize it as vehicle for rural development. Hence the vicious circle of neglect and poverty which the 1976 Local Government Reforms were intended to cure has continued unchecked.

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