

Existence of Opposition Parties in A Democracy: Indispensable or Futile?

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ABSTRACT: The paper takes a cursory look at meaning, origin, roles, importance, merits and demerits of opposition party(ies) in a saner clime (i.e. ideal/developed democratic settings). In carrying out the study, the researchers employed both primary and secondary sources as well as historical and scientific methods of data collection. In the course of the work the researchers considers at both sides of the existence of opposition parties if its existence is useful or futile? Finally recommendations were made to political gladiators most especially in the developing or underdeveloped states more importantly those at the opposition sides to borrow leaves from the ways the oppositions does in a saner clime.

KEY-WORDS: Opposition, Democracy, electioneering, Appointees, pseudo-dictatorship.

I. INTRODUCTION

Democracy as a governing system has many constituents that must be in place in order to make it function appropriately; this includes political parties, an electoral umpire, a constitution and so on. When all is in place, an election must take place and a ruling party and an opposition party must emerge. Without an opposition party, the people can be forced into frustration in the long run if their will is not being reflected, the social system becomes a pseudo-dictatorship and the social stability democracy it intends to create will be defeated. The society would be forced to a state of anomie after a long stint of societal tolerance which portends – “when there is no choice available, the available becomes the choice.” Frustration leads to aggression and in most cases, aggressively topples the subjugating government of the day. A typical and recent example is the Arab Spring which toppled repressive governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and some governments in the Middle East.

The opposition role is that of preparing to go into government, political parties in Nigeria are mostly heard of, or ‘seen’, only during electioneering, thereafter, they disappear or put themselves on ice for nearly four years, until the next election period. A few big parties assume the role of opposition, that is, they claim to be the opposition, even though they do not play the opposition role.

As at today ‘opposition’ parties in Nigeria include – Peoples Democratic Party, Action Democratic Congress, Accord Party, Zenith Labour Party, All Progressives Grand Alliance, All Nigeria Peoples Party – to mention the major ones, appear to think that their role in opposition is to play the role of ‘enemy’ of the government. Thus, what they do, instead of what they should be doing, is for individuals from their ranks to verbally abuse members of the government – from the president, ministers, to other appointees – from time to time, often in the personal capacities of these individuals, “he is a fool, he doesn’t know what he is doing”, “he is a drunken fisherman, dare he talk to me?”, “he/she is a person without pedigree”, “they are talking nonsense”, using insecticide on enemy and deodorant on cronies, etc.

Politics, one would venture to posit, is a game for gentlemen (and women of course!) It should be considered a game for intellectuals, people of refined mind. Such people are capable of showing respect for even their true enemies, not to talk of political opponents. Indeed, what should be criticised are the actions and inactions of the individual and not his/ her person, to be able to differentiate their personal lives from public positions when criticising them.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

In politics, the opposition comprises one or more political parties or other organized groups that are opposed, primarily ideologically, to the government, party or group in political control of a city, region, state, country (Shiva Jaiswal 2018). The degree of opposition varies according to political conditions – for example, across authoritarian and liberal systems where opposition may be either repressed or desired respectively.

According to Rimsha Khan (2017). Quotes Don Brash who posits that, Opposition parties represents alternatives to party in government or the ruling party(ies, i.e in case a of coalition government), and is responsible for challenging the policies of the government and producing different policies where appropriate.

Kishore H.K. (2018). Opines that a party which is not in the government either directly or indirectly in a particular state or country is treated to be an opposition party.

To Keith Young (2018). Defines opposition parties as the ones who have representation in parliament but are not in power (either in their own right or as part of a coalition)

Bhargav Bhamidipati (2018). Opines that Opposition is a concept idealised to avoid majoritarian decisions in the government. As the opposition is also a group of elected representatives and hence their view of equal value. This concept is based on the Principle of Checks and Balances. Its primary job is to have a check on government decisions and to constructively oppose proposed laws. Their another constructive job is to contribute to law making by suggestions to the government.

The Role of Opposition Parties In consolidating Democracy

Considering the last paragraph of the introductory aspect of this research, then it is important to now clearly elucidate the constitutionally stipulated/expected roles of opposition parties if democracy must be strengthened and consolidated in any society. Some of these according to Shivam Jha (2018) are;

1. Make government Accountable.
2. Make government Responsible.
3. Put pressure on government So, it can work effectively.
4. Arise question behalf of people in parliament.
5. Help to improve the policy and programme of government.
6. It acts as pressure group.
7. It keeps a check on the working of the ruling party.
8. It puts different views in the Parliament and criticise the government for its failures or wrong policies.
- 11 They act as check on excesses of the government by highlighting the abuses of the government and putting it on its toes for service delivery.
12. Provides an alternative government in waiting in the event that the ruling party is unable to govern.
- 13 Offers serious managerial and alternative solutions to country's problems in parliament.
- 14 Sell their alternative ideas to the citizens on governance thus helping to mobilise the people to participate in government.
15. They complement government efforts in national development for example, trade, health, education and political developments

1.To hold governments accountable; they serve as watchdogs ensuring government functions within the confines of the law, exposing the likes of corruption, nepotism, and the abuse of power. They pursue justice upon any deviation from the law or constitution by government.

2. To serve as a credible alternative to the ruling government; this function is crucial because competition is healthy in ensuring better service delivery and preventing complacency by the sitting government.

3. To promote and stimulate debates in parliament; often after elections a quiet season descends, with the winning party and politicians resurfacing in the build-up to the next election. Opposition is in a privileged position to call for debate and media attention on key issues being debated in parliament. The opposition can further push for a national conversation while enhancing a culture of democratic discourse. It is opposition that can foster national debate and strengthen policy.

4. Make government Responsible. One of the ways of making government responsible to fulfill their part of contract by protecting the lives and properties, provisions of quality infrastructural facilities, such as good water supply, uninterrupted powers supply, good road network, world standard health facilities,etc.

5. Put pressure on government so, it can work effectively. It is the duty of opposition party(ies) to mount pressure on the ruling party so that it can work effectively on every facets of state life, be it economy, political, social, religion, sports, administration, international relations, etc.

6. Arise question behalf of people in parliament. Another role/function of opposition party in a democracy is to raise question on behalf of the citizens. This is because, there are some national issues that a single person or ordinary group of people can not ask government, but since there is or are existence of opposition party(ies), such question are rightly channeled through them even in the parliament where decision that affects peoples life are made.

7. Criticize wrong policy(ies) of government. Criticizing the ruling party is seen to be the major role of opposition party(ies) and which the beauty of any democratic society. But in doing this, it is expected of the opposition party(ies) to criticize constructively, so tha they will be seen to be objective and not bias. (Bolu, M.B 2018).

8. **Help to improve the policy(ies) and programme(s) of government.** While Criticizing wrong policy(ies) of government, opposition party(ies) suggests ways of improving the criticized policy(ies) and programmes so that such policy(ies) and programmes will be people oriented.

9. **Sell their alternative ideas to the citizens on governance thus helping to mobilise the people to participate in government.** Opposition party(ies) as a way of mobilizing the citizenry to participate in governance, because it affects them directly or indirectly, they sell their lofty ideas to citizens as an alternative to government policies, which makes the government of the day to be always conversant of whatever decisions to be taken knowing fully well that opposition party(ies) are there to bring new ideas that can rubbish the one puts out and that is brightening the chance of the opposition party(ies) in the subsequent elections. (Blondel, J 1997).

10. **They complement government efforts in national development for example, trade, health, education and political developments.** Since being the opposition is not that either the ruling party or the opposition are enemy, but the aim of these different parties is to win and control the machinery of the state for the purpose of developing such society, therefore, the opposition party(ies) should see it as a point of duty and responsibility to complement the efforts of the ruling party in order to take the state/ country to the greater height, because, an opposition party(ies) today will definitely becomes a ruling party tomorrow.

III. THE CHALLENGES FACING OPPOSITION PARTIES IN AFRICA

In Africa, there are so many issues that divide opposition parties than those that unite them. For example, the electorate votes along racial and/or ethnic lines.

Secondly, as some scholars have observed, in Africa followers of such parties identify the leaders with the party and show their loyalty solely to the party leader and not to the party's ideology.

There are, however, also those who vote along ideological lines from all racial groups, but they constitute a tiny minority.

Moreover, another weakness of opposition parties on the continent is that they are fragmented. They are invariably small and weak. This aspect strengthens the power of the incumbents. Botswana and South Africa are examples in point. In Zimbabwe on the other hand the MDC is very strong even though it is regarded as reactionary. It is threatening ZANU PF because there are not fragmented opposition political parties in Zimbabwe. The most important weakness of the African political parties mentioned repeatedly by many researchers is the fact that they are seldom grown out of big social movements and are the creation of ambitious individuals. e.g PDP, APC and others in case of Nigeria

Additionally, financing political parties is another major hurdle on the continent. In fact, party political funding is a global problem. In South Africa, the ruling ANC controls political party funding and gives itself the lion's share as well as engaging in unethical and corrupt business deals through its investment outfit, Chancellor House, by benefiting from government tenders and contracts. There is no regulation of political party funding because the ANC and the DA are against legislation regulating political party funding although it is the norm in other democracies internationally. Disclosure of sources of funding and regulation of political party funding are not enough. There must also be legislation limiting campaign spending which all the parties have ignored except the PAC. If there are no spending limits then that situation engenders unfair competition and elections thus run cannot be said to be fair.

Furthermore, the media, especially in most of these African countries, e.g NBC-Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, comprising NTA (Nigerian Television Authority) and radio Nigeria with all their FM allies, the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) etc. which is the public broadcaster gives too much publicity to the ruling party while giving lesser publicity to the official opposition and scant coverage to smaller political parties especially towards the elections. All ruling party political party events are always covered live. Therefore to overcome the problems opposition political parties face, there must be equal media coverage of all political parties activities irrespective of party's strength numerically, financially, area of coverage and the like.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Looking at the presentation of the paper, it becomes an indisputable fact that for any democratic settings to be meaningful and most especially in Africa to be in tune with the developed democracies of the world, the following recommendations are made;

- ✓ To start with, ethnicity, tribalism and racial discrimination has to be shunned in African pattern of voting. This is because, it has been observed that majority of the electorate votes along these trends, the result of which has been sentimental selection, bad/poor representation of interest. Therefore, qualified and competent people has to be elected into public offices irrespective of their ethnic background.
- ✓ For everyone to be a member of whatever political party, nationalism and patriotism is expected to be their watch ward, instead of being loyal to their leader that are egocentric and self centered. This is because, being nationalistic and patriotic will be the driving force towards national development by

treating the opposition parties as partners in progress and not as enemy or thorn in the flesh to be dealt with.

- ✓ Additionally, for opposition to be meaningful in African democracy, spirit of sportsmanship needs to be embraced. This means that, everybody will be going to the poll with the mind of “Olympic is not to win but to participate”. This will allow a level plain ground for all participants from all political parties and will make the results acceptable by all and sundry.
- ✓ Moreover, winning/ruling party should avoid the policy of winner takes all and loser losses all, but to try and form all inclusive government in the nation’s interest, while the opposition party(ies) member appointed should also see the given opportunity as call to service and not be using the opportunity to expose the weakness of the ruling party or be leaking the official secret of the government.
- ✓ Members of the opposition parties should cultivate the habits of playing legal and official role of monitoring, constructive criticisms and advising ruling party where necessary rather than trying to make the country ungovernable for the ruling party, because an opposition party today can, may or will become a ruling party tomorrow and what goes round comes round.

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