

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The role of opposition in Nigerian politics

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In a political and truly democratic endeavour, the foundational basis for balance leads to the horizontal separation of powers rather than any vertical formulation of any kind of corruption of this pragmatic ethos. Central to this balance in government is that of the expression of opposition on a parallel political level. This paper delves into the nature, both legal and philosophical, of opposition in politics generally and in Nigeria, in particular. This is written in a period of genuine befuddlement in Nigeria in view of the present muffling of opposition. The paper concludes that the role of opposition is sacrosanct as it is essential to the smooth running of any representative democracy. It has helped in galvanizing the citizenry to partake in government's activities; define issues in the psyche of the ruler and the ruled; present political candidates whose candidature are founded more on issues and less on sex, tribe or religion; accept the responsibility of governance on an agenda that is rate-based. Government must therefore, at all levels strive to open the channels of expression and encourage individuality of opinions as this helps in opening up debates for the polity, leading to better thought-out policies.

**Key words:** Nigeria, role, opposition, politics.

## INTRODUCTION

A society is organized in a way that every member of the society must abide by the ethos, rules and regulations put in place to ensure peace, order and good government. Naturally, every man desires to be free, do whatever he likes, and possibly have his way. In a society, it is not possible for everybody to have his way at all times as his views must be balanced with the position of other members of the society.

The need to now regulate the relationship of an individual member of the society with that of others gives credence to existence of government. The need to orderly seek the balance calls for political organization. Politics is derived from the Greek word "polis" that is, a city-state. According to Appradorai (1975), politics can be defined as the science concerned with the state and the conditions essential to its existence and development. There are so many forms of government including theocracy, autocracy, gerontocracy, and democracy which is the concern in this work.

The most satisfactory way of organizing the society in a democratic set up is the formula of majority rule. This

acknowledges the pristine position of every individual having a role to play in the society. All constituent members of the community are necessarily given the opportunity to have their say while the majorities usually have their way.

The need to strike a delicate balance between majority power and minority rights is the catalyst to the noble roles any political party in opposition in any democracy must engage in. It must be agreed from the onset that this appears to be one of the most difficult issues facing any democratic society anywhere in the world and the failure to achieve this harmonious working relationship explains the failure of democratic experiences. It has been said, "democracy has waged its all upon the belief that in the end the majority and the minority can learn to live together, each respecting the power or rights of the other (Carr et al., 1951).

This paper intends to address the role expected of any political party that fails to gain political power at any point in time vis-à-vis the party in power. The work is divided into five main parts of introduction, concept of democracy, opposition in a democracy, role of opposition and conclusion.

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## CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

Generally, it is not easy to define or delimit the concept of

democracy mainly because of the varied approach as dictated by various countries. It is seen as “manifestly vague and flexible concept with contentious meanings” (Popoola, 2007). The word “democracy” has its remote origin in the Greek word *demokratia* (*demos*-the people, plus *kratia* (from *Kartos*)-sway, authority) meaning “the rule by the people”. The impression of this conveys a form of government where the people directly take decisions by themselves without representation as in the Greek City State or indirectly by representation as it is presently, in most states of the world today.

The Oxford English Dictionary, in an attempt to convey the meaning of the concept, defines democracy as: “1(a) government by the people: that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole and is exercised either directly by them (as in small republic of antiquity) or by officers elected by them; but in modern life, often more vaguely denoting a social state in which all have equal rights without hereditary or arbitrary difference of rank or privilege; (b) A state or community in which the government is vested in the people as a whole; (2) that class of people which have no heredity of special rank or privilege; the common people (in reference to their political powers)”.

With the development in the world today, especially with the increase in population, land and technology, it is no longer possible for all the people to take part in the government as “ruler”. Decisions are now taken through representatives who are usually elected through a process which is expected to be free and fair. The concept of a democratic society also encompasses a society in which the wishes of the majority or other representatives become law (where they so desire), taking careful note and sometimes acceding also to the wishes of the minority. Both the majority and minority have roles to play. The majority will have their way while the minority will have their say.

The Supreme Court of the United States of America has described democracy as a government that is free, leaves the way wide open to favour, discuss, advocate, or incite causes and doctrines even if such views are obnoxious and antagonistic to others (Black, 1958). Recently, attempts have been made to define what constitutes a democratic country. For example, in Speiser (1958), it was defined as a free society in which government is based upon the consent of an informed citizenry and is dedicated to the protection of the rights of all; even the most despised minorities.

The implication of this is that a government can only be free if it takes into consideration the views of all the constituent parts of the community. Taking another view of the matter in the Indian case of *Thapper* (1950), it was said that it allows for freedom of speech and the press laid at the foundation of all democratic organization; this is because without free political discussion, no public education so essential for the proper functioning of the processes of popular government is possible (Nwabueze, 1982). This is however, subject to the security of the state so that some degree of control is permissible in the interest of security, so long as it is reasonably necessary for that purpose.

The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria provides the basis for the operation of democracy in Nigeria by proclaiming equality, justice, welfare of the people as the primary goal of government dignity of human persons, and equality of opportunities.

It follows from the above that there are certain minimum characteristics which a democracy ought to possess. The followings have been identified by Austine Ranney and Wilmoer Kendall (cited by Azinge n.d-[www.spspng.org/.../judiciary%20and%20Consolidation%20of%20Democracy%20in%20](http://www.spspng.org/.../judiciary%20and%20Consolidation%20of%20Democracy%20in%20)) as the important ones:

- (i) Sovereignty of the people which connotes that leader must do according to the people’s wish and whatever the people oppose is avoided by the ruler.
- (ii) Equality of all members of the community to express a view on the way the society is being governed, irrespective of his/her standing in the society.
- (iii) Popular consultation and majority rule, that is, there must be an understanding that when the enfranchised members of the community disagree as to what ought to be done, the last word lies in some sense with the larger number and never the smaller. That is, the majority of the electorate and not the minority should carry the day.

There is also the need for provisions of basic freedom for the citizen and political competition for power to be organized through political parties. The totality of the concept envisages that the society is organized in a way that no individual or a group of individuals will lord it over the generality of the people. This appears to be the bane of democratic rule in Nigeria where today the concept of political “godfatherism” has dominated the political landscape. This development negatively contributed to the stunted growth of democracy in Nigeria and fundamentally affected its sustenance.

There are complexities in the society which was the result of the spread of capitalism and industrialization and which led to modification of the practice of direct democracy as it was generally conceptualized (Abdulraheem, 2006). This led to what is now known as representative democracy. This is the defining mechanism for democracy as characterized by party politics and competition by way of election. Democracy, according to Lipson (1964), is: “that government of the people which is conducted by representatives of their choosing on their behalf and under their intimate control” (quoted in AbdulRaheem, 2006). In the same vein, Fukuyana (1995) defined a democratic country as one that grants “its people that right to choose their own government through periodic secret ballot and multiparty elections on the basis of universal and equal adult suffrage”.

The idea of representative government as epitomized by liberal representative democracy has been criticized for discriminating against the poor and does not allow the generality of the people to have control over their representatives. This position was championed by Toffler (1989) that: “Representative government does not change the structure of power. Nowhere do the people exercise the real political control. Election merely provides the illusions of equality and exercise of power.

Elections are no more than reassurance rituals. Election takes place intermittently but the exercise of influence by the elites goes on uninterruptedly. Everywhere the gap between the representatives and the represented widens" (Abdulraheem, 2006). Toffler may be right in his criticism but the fact is that in the world today, there seems to be no alternative to representative democracy. The seeming alternative is the prescription of divine rule, which according to the author's opinion, also accommodates representative democracy. Mass democratic rule as exemplified by the Greek City States cannot work in modern day societies. Whether the people like it or not, the fact is that the only pragmatic and practicable form of government is through representation.

This form of government has also been subjected to what is now regarded as inequality in substance and lacking in economic and social right, but only projecting political values. It has been argued by economic rights proponents that any component in governance form of democracy lacking in these values is hollow, void, and meaningless (Ake, 1992). Within the African milieu, Ake argued that the only democracy that will appeal to the masses in the continent must be: "a social democracy which goes beyond abstract political right and takes concrete economic and social rights seriously". A democracy of empowerment which invests heavily in the upliftment of ordinary people so that they can participate effectively in governance and be more competitive in promoting their material interests (Ake, 1992).

The critics also argued that cultural differences from where the idea of participatory or representative democracy developed and what exists in developing economies and that of the less developed countries is a major factor in its implementation. It was argued that there is nothing that can be regarded as democracy in general terms but rather democracy as dictated by the history of each society (Kuna, 1996) (AbdulRaheem, 2006). As attractive as the arguments of critics are, different communities, especially in Africa before the "imported democracy", organize themselves in one form of governance or other. The leadership of a reasonable number of communities in Nigeria is usually through democratic means. For instance, in Yoruba land, the Obas are usually selected by the Chiefs who are usually representatives of the different interests and segments of the community. Where an Oba becomes autocratic in the old Oyo Empire, he is advised to abdicate the throne, which he cannot refuse. This can be equated with the impeachment proceeding in the present democratic set up.

It appears the critics see democracy as an end in itself instead of being only a means to an end. This was the view of Schumpeter (1943) when he posited: "Democracy is a political method, a certain type of institutional arrangement for arriving at political, legislative and administrative decisions and hence, incapable of being an end in itself". Adedeji (1995) also shared this view as he contended that democracy is only a means to good governance. Two views have been expressed on the duty of representatives. One of the views is to the effect that a representative is simply an agent or delegate; an

ambassador who has to vote in the parliament according to the instructions and mandate of his constituents. The other views perceive a representative as a senator who is chosen for his superior wisdom and integrity and who is therefore, free to use his best judgment upon issues and called upon to decide. The former is called theory of instructed representation or telephone theory of representation while the latter is the theory of uninstructed representation (Appadorai, 1975).

The theory of telephone representation has been criticized on the ground that it is not possible for the representative to state all his total views because of time constraints. Deliberation in parliament is made ineffective because the representative has arrived at his final decision before deliberation commences. The approach is immoral in the sense that as the approach demands the sacrifice of others in favour of his views, it has the tendency of affecting the quality of legislation and it also emphasizes local interest.

The other approach is also too loose where the agent becomes the principal and has total and absolute discretion to even compromise the position of his constituents. A balance between the two extremes is what representative should be and since this is just a means to an end then, the best form of leadership today is still the representative democracy.

## **OPPOSITION IN A DEMOCRACY**

The liberal democracy as it is known today is a result of protracted struggles and revolutions in Europe between 17 - 19th century as led by social forces whose interests and roles were interlineally linked with the use of capitalism (Mmegi, 2009). The Network of Ethiopian Scholars (NES) Scandinavian Chapter, in her June 30, 2005 release, "put the opposition in a democracy in perspective" argued that in a democracy, there are many types of people who ordinarily wish to stand for election, some may even be people who do not share the same world view. And once an election is held, which is regarded as free and fair, and a set of the people succeeded in persuading the majority public who got more votes than their competitors, it is a fact that those that lost the election have to live with the victorious ones within the period of the rule, as guaranteed by the constitution, and the losers must be ready to wait till the next election.

The operative and operational position, hence, is "free and fair election". This appears to be utopian especially in the less developed economies of the world. There cannot be any perfect election anywhere in the world because it is a human endeavour. There can however, be an election that can be regarded as generally representative of the views of the majority of the electorate. Where an election is characterized by rigging, manipulation, violence, thuggery, inadequacy or insufficiency of electoral materials, substantial non compliance with electoral rules, it may be difficult to conceptualize the position of the opposition to such regimes.

It must be emphasized that irrespective of how a

government emerged, the way to get such government replaced can only be through the instrumentality of the law. By parity of reasoning, the Supreme Court in the case of *ACB V Rossek* (1993), in deciding on what could be done where a court has given a decision that is patently wrong, or apparently perverse, has expressed that the only option available to the aggrieved is to obey the order and take appropriate legitimate and legal steps to redress the wrong. He cannot unilaterally refuse to obey the lawful order of the court. The alternative is anarchy. In the same vein, where an electoral body has decided on the winner of an electoral contest, the loser must abide by that decision until same is changed by the Election Petition Tribunal usually put in place by the constitution. The term "leader of opposition" dates back to 1807 in the United Kingdom where it emerged initially through the practice in terms of which the leader of a political party not in government with the largest representation in parliament was designated as leader of opposition. This practice later crystallized into a constitutional custom and convention.

This convention was eventually given statutory recognition in the passing of the Ministers of the Crown Act of 1937 wherein section 10(1) provides. "The leader of opposition means a member of the House of Commons who is for the time being the leader of the House of the party in opposition to His Majesty's Government which has the greatest numerical strength in the house." Section 10(3) provides further that if any doubt arises as to which is or was at the material time of the party in opposition to his Majesty's Government having the greatest numerical strength in the House of Commons or as who is or was at the material time of the leader in that house of such party the question shall be decided for purposes of this Act by the Speaker of the House of Commons and his decision shall be final and conclusive.

Since 1937, when this Act was put in place in the United Kingdom, the leader of opposition has enjoyed certain rights and privileges which include getting paid the same salary as government ministers, an official car, and official residence. The same situation prevails in commonwealth countries like Australia, Canada and New Zealand. In Botswana, the salaries and allowances act gives the speaker authority to designate the leader of opposition without any mechanism provided by the act for designating such a leader. However, in the workings of the state, the speaker usually consults the opposition members of parliament to determine who they want as leader.

In the United States of America, there is no designation of opposition in the sense that we have it in the United Kingdom. There exists two party system where a party receives the support of a majority of all voters and thus, is given a clear title to govern the country. Because of the peculiarities of the electoral system in the United States, it is technically possible for one party to win control of one or both houses of Congress. It was reported that in the 1956 election, the Republicans elected a President and democrats won control of Congress for the first time since 1848 (Carr, 1951). This state of affairs has repeated itself many times thereafter. What usually

happens is that the minority party is usually given the opportunity of choosing a minority leader that usually has some rights and privileges, as any other leader in the Congress.

In Nigeria, the leader of opposition arrangement was put in place in the first republic in line with what operated in the United Kingdom. Chief Obafemi Awolowo became leader of opposition in the first republic while it lasted. When the first republic collapsed, the American Presidential system was introduced and the Unity Party of Nigeria produced the minority leader. The present dispensation has also put in place the position of Minority together with that of Majority Leader. A new scenario was created in Ekiti State where both the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the Action Congress (AC) has equal number of members in the Ekiti State House of Assembly. The question of which party is the majority party and which is the minority party was in issue. This logjam affected the proclamation of the House for a while until a political solution was put in place where the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) nominated the Speaker and the Action Congress (AC) nominated the Deputy Speaker. With the sacking of the Governor of the State by the Court of Appeal sitting in Ilorin and a re-run ordered in a few polling units, the PDP Speaker was appointed the Acting Governor while the AC Deputy Speaker took over as the Acting Speaker.

This scenario has properly brought to the fore the need for harmonious relationship between government and opposition at any point in time. This is because where there is a free and fair election, the pendulum can change at any time as it is witnessed in the United States of America where the Republicans and Democrats are elected into government and voted out at any time or the other. It is not that there are no other parties in the USA. Third parties have in the past won enough support among voters to threaten the majority parties with the possibility that they might gain a balance of power in the political scene (Carr, 1951). This situation has forced the majority parties to pay constant attention to the pressures exacted by third parties and that is the beauty of democracy.

## **ROLE OF OPPOSITION**

Alabi (2009) argued that opposition is muffled in many parts of Africa because of colonial legacies and cultural factors. Democracy in Nigeria will develop if the opposition appropriately appreciates its role and adequately carries out same with the expected altruistic motives. In the parliamentary system of government as practiced in the United Kingdom, the tasks and responsibilities of the leader of opposition are clearly spelt out and are challenging especially if the parliamentary duties are considered.

Apart from the assigned roles in the parliament, he is expected to co-ordinate the activities of his party outside parliament especially at the level of mass struggle if the opposition must effectively challenge the ruling party.

There is usually what is called a shadow cabinet which

oversees all segments of the government, provides alternative ideas, and articulates the policies of the party on every policy decision of the ruling party.

The Network of Ethiopian Scholars (NES) articulated the position that a key component of democracy is the toleration of dissent and that the only condition is that dissenters do not engage in violating the rights of others and use of force, deception or fraud to pursue their interests and goals. The group argued further that as long as they express their dissenting voices within the bounds of democratic ethos, there is no reason to bar them from playing active role in public life.

This is an area that has to be given a more pragmatic consideration in Nigeria. Opposition must not be for opposition sake and it must be devoid of violence and must be within the globally accepted standard or best practice. The people in government are not angels; they are human and indeed Nigerians. They are liable to make mistakes and in the same way as party in opposition. The only duty an opposition party need is to provide an alternative view and this must be properly dissected, articulated and effectively communicated to the general public. NES asked the question (as if it is directed at the political class in Nigeria): "Why was it not possible to use debate, dialogue and democratic forum to those whom it thinks have not acknowledged the regime's self validated and justified role as having contributed positive good".

It must be realized by both government and opposition that the aspiration to be in government is for one common goal-service to the people. From the dynamics of the happenings in Nigeria, it is clear that apart from a very few individuals in and out of government, it appears that the majority of the political class are "crass opportunists". It has nothing to do with any political party and neither does it have any colouration of ruling or opposition party.

The result of the various local government elections betrayed the political class. Where the Peoples Democratic Party is the ruling party, all the seats must necessarily be won by that party. Where the controlling party is the Action Congress, all the Local Government Chairmen invariably are members of the Action Congress. Equally, where the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) is the dominant party, then, the seats at the local governments are in the ANPP's firm control.

This trend portends a grave danger and engenders the possibility of muffling the opposition party and that is likely to serve as a negative commentary on democratic rule and ideals. This is what the leadership of the various political parties and those in government swore to uphold. The oppression and victimization of the opposition elements throughout Nigeria was identified by Awolowo (1966) as one of the factors which led to the collapse of the first republic. Awolowo also argued that dissent is a hallmark of representative democracy (Awolowo, 1981). The sage argued further: "Surely, Nigeria is big enough under a democratic form of government to accommodate those in government, on the one hand, and that not in government, on the other hand. Besides, there is always more than one side to any issue. It is the congenital intolerance of the voice of dissent on their part that

makes those in government desirous of bringing all articulate elements within their circle of decisive influence in order to silence and stifle such elements". The principle behind this position is unassailable but the fundamental of its postulation appears faulty. The position of Awolowo was that, there should not be any arrangement like national or unity government as it is an attempt to stifle the opposition voice. If the essence of national government is to ensure that every segment of the society is given a say in government then there should not be any problem. However, the practice in Nigeria appears to justify the fears expressed by Awolowo. In principle, the muffling, stifling and compromise of the opposition through the instrumentality of the national government is a failure of the opposition parties and not that of the government.

The arrangement of involving all political parties in government is not peculiar to Nigeria. Such a scheme, according to Carr, makes it often seems a party, especially the one in government is more concerned about advancing the desires of its leaders for personal power, prestige and gain or promoting the interest of a limited few among its followers than in its electing candidates to office who will carry out the promises that have won it the support of the majority of the voters.

For a party in opposition, it is its function to engage in constant criticisms of the governmental policies which are formulated by the majority, to scrutinize carefully the manner in which these policies are administered, and to keep the possibility of alternative legislative policies and administrative practices constantly in the view of the electorate. The major functions of a political party as identified by Carr are in the main:

- (i) Stimulating the citizenry to take a greater interest in election and activities of government.
- (ii) Defining political issues of the day and sharpen the choice between alternative paths.
- (iii) Presenting candidates who are committed to announce position with respect to issues.
- (iv) Majority party provides basis upon which government can be operated.
- (v) Accepting responsibility to govern upon winning election.

It was then, added that a party must at all times, either in or out of power, constantly ensure that it gauges the mood of the society on all issues and provides appropriate responsible succour to the needs of the society at intellectual and applied levels.

## CONCLUSION

At any point in time there can only be one driver in a car and whichever party the society chooses as the government at any point, it has a responsibility to discharge that mandate effectively and efficiently. At that point, the party that is not in government also has a role to play to show the electorates that it is better positioned to provide leadership and thus, must provide the

alternative reasoning on all issues.

There must be an opportunity for persons holding contrasting ideas, views, outlook, and philosophy concerning the solution to social, political, and economic problem to air their view freely and without any form of intimidation. There must be an ample opportunity for society to debate alternate courses of action before deciding upon a particular policy. Any group of people either organized or otherwise however, small that presents itself as having solution to any form of problem afflicting the society at any point in time must be allowed to suggest or present his or her ideas to the public.

It has been said that without a free market place of ideas, a democratic society runs the risk of basing its public policy upon insufficient data and inadequate understanding of the data that are available. It is the role of all social institutions to help man put his talents to good use and to realize his hopes and aspiration. It is the role of government in particular to enable man to preserve and enjoy his individuality, and at the same time that it enables him to join with other men in cooperative social action that is not only based upon decision by the majority, but that also seeks to advance the welfare of all.

Truth is an elusive concept; government has a duty to keep open the channels of expression and to see to it that proper consideration is given to contrasting points of view before public policies are determined upon. The opposition must also behave responsibly in the interest of the society.

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