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The Political Parties and Political Participation in Rivers State, Nigeria: A Case Study of 2015 General Elections

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Abstract

The study reviewed the activities of the political parties and its impact on voters' participation in the political activities in Rivers State. In pursuit of this objective, the study generated secondary data, and applied content analysis as the tool of analysis. The scope of the study is on the political activities of the various political parties and the arising political issues before, during and after the 2015 general elections in the state. The social exclusion theory was adopted as the theoretical framework of analysis. The study in its findings noted that all the political parties in the state within the period under review carried out various political activities that had significant impact on political participation of the voters in the electoral process and the political system in the state. The study further agreed that all the political parties in the state could be classified as opposition political parties due to its status in the polity at the federal or state levels within the period. The study made some useful recommendations on the modalities to redirect the activities of the political parties to encourage effective participation of the electorates in the political system in the state.

Key Words: Political opposition, political party, political participation, political activities

Introduction

The political history and constitution of Nigeria have been favourable to the politics of political parties, hence, the formation of political parties and its activities at various times in Nigeria. The existence of political parties in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era and has been sustained since independence. The politics of colonialism and the struggle for political independence gave rise to the formation of various pressure groups, mass movements, and political associations, some of which were transformed to different political parties in demand for political participation by Nigerians in the colonial political activities and ultimate independence. Wapmuk (2014, p. 87) corroborated the above view and identified the Lagos Auxiliary of the Anti-slavery and Aborigines Protections Society, West African Students Union, and Nigerian Youth Movement as pressure groups which evolved into political parties during the colonial era. For instance, the Lagos Auxiliary of the Anti-slavery and Aborigines Protections Society was transformed into Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP) headed by Herbert Macaulay in 1923 (the first political party to contest the legislative elections in Lagos following the introduction of elective principle by Clifford Constitution). In the 1930s, the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) protested against the discriminatory practices in the education sector by the British government on one hand, and on the other hand contested the legislative Council seats in Lagos. However, both the NNDP and NYM later merged to form one political party – National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) on 24th August, 1944 with the basic aim of providing formidable opposition against the political activities of the colonial government. This trend continued, and in preparation for the independence, many political parties were formed to participate in the political activities. Wapmuk (2014, p. 87) and Niwora (2014) added that in 1960, due to the inability of a particular political party to win majority seats in the federal parliament to form the government at the centre, the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) that won 148 seats in all the Northern Region formed the parliamentary government at the centre with NCNC, which won 89 seats, leaving the Action Group (AG), which won 75 seats to function as the major opposition party in the First Republic. However, the NPC, NCNC and AG controlled the Northern, Eastern, and Western regional governments respectively. The Second Republic, 1979-1983 witnessed another face of political party politics. The National Party of Nigeria led by Alhaji Shehu Shagari won the presidential elections and formed the government at the federal level, while other parties – Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP), People Redemption Party (PRP), Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP), etc. including NPN won and ruled various states. From 1999 to 2015, the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) won and sustained power at the federal level, with

the same PDP and other political parties ruling various states based on their election victory at various times. Within this period, Rivers State was also governed by the ruling PDP at the federal level until 2013. The merger of some opposition parties with the aggrieved members of the ruling PDP gave rise to the formation of All Progressive Congress (APC) and was formally registered as a political party by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on 31st July, 2013 as a mega opposition party in Nigeria. The formation of APC provided the needed plat-form for a stronger opposition politics and indeed, APC and others played a prominent role as opposition political parties in a democratic setting (Thom-Otuya and Wilson, 2014, p. 78).

The situation led to a change in the political trajectory of Rivers State, when on 27th November, 2013 the former Governor Rotimi Amaechi also defected from PDP to APC with his cabinet members; and in 2014, 25 out of the 32 law makers in the state House of Assembly defected from PDP to APC, thereby making Rivers State to be in opposition for the first time in political history of the state. This development created a lot of challenges, particularly during the 2015 general elections in the state. The result of the 2015 general elections proved that APC (an opposition party) won the presidential elections and majority in the National Assembly, while PDP won the governorship election and majority seats in the Rivers State House of Assembly, thereby reversing the situation. But this still places Rivers State Government as an opposition to the ruling APC at the federal level. In addition, the PDP led Rivers State Government is also facing severe opposition from other political parties in the state, including APC with subsequent litigations that has resulted in the nullification of the 3 senatorial, 12 House of Representatives, and 22 Rivers State House of Assembly election results. The nullifications by courts warranted a rerun election conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on 19th March, 2016 in Rivers State. During the 2015 general and 2106 re-run elections, the political parties apply different strategies, including mobilisation of their members for participation in the political process, while contesting and struggling for power in the political system in the state. Arising from the mobilisation for participation, both the general elections in 2015 and the 2016 rerun elections witnessed intensive contest and struggle for political power and supremacy between Rotimi Amaechi (former Governor), and Nyeson Wike (incumbent governor), also serving as leaders of APC and PDP interest respectively in the state. During the period, there were mobilisation and counter-mobilisation of citizens by all the political parties for participation in the electoral process. This struggle resulted in electoral violence, political crisis, killings, deprivation of human rights and communal crisis, as their political supporters employed several means to ensure electoral victory for their party. Edozie (2016) corroborates the above view that the various elections were characterised by irregularities, wide- spread violence and killings, electoral malpractices resulting in the death of many people in the state. In

view of the above, it is the interest of this study to identify the activities of the political parties and their leaders in the 2015 general elections, and examine its impacts on political participation of the voters in Rivers State.

Scope of the Study

This study centred on the activities of various political parties in Rivers State before, during and after the 2015 general elections in the state. The time frame for the study is mainly the arising issues from the 2015 elections in the state. In 2015 general elections, PDP was the ruling party at the federal level, while APC was the ruling party in Rivers State, and all the political parties, including ruling and opposition political parties employed various resources and activities to mobilise their citizens to participate in the elections to ensure that they win the elections and take over political power at various levels. This struggle resulted in severe marginalisation of the citizens and challenges to the democratic activities in the state. The study further considers the effects of the activities of the political parties and their leaders on political participation of the citizens in Rivers State.

Conceptual Issues

Political Participation: Political participation as a concept has been given a wide range of definitions by different scholars based on their perspectives and understanding of the concept. For the political scientists, political participation entails participation in activities of a political system of a state. According to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995:38) political participation means “activities that have intent or effect of influencing government action – directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or directly influencing the selection of people who make these policies; that participation is not obligatory and receives no pay or financial compensation” and not by “being attentive to politics” but by doing “politics.” This suggests that political participation requires the involvement of the citizens through participating in democratic activities, which influence the political actions of the state. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) add that political participation is that action of individuals that influences government decision on distribution of social goods and values in the society. The implication of this is that the citizens have the capacity to influence government actions through their participation in the political system. Political participation goes beyond influencing the governmental actions, to include activities of the citizens used to influence the selection of political leaders, the actions of leaders, and the policies they pursue. Political participation is achieved in a given political system when citizens exercise their freedom of speech, partake in the conduct of public affairs, contest elections, campaign freely, and are freely elected to hold public office for the good of the majority citizens. Other forms of political participation

include protest on political issues, public consultations, jury duty, joining interest groups, volunteering for a campaign etc.

Political participation in Rivers State within the periods of 2015 general elections and 2016 re-run elections witnessed a situation in which citizens were “willing” to participate in the democratic process, but in most cases were not able to. The deprivation of the majority from participating in the political activities was necessitated by the use of state and non-state agents to manipulate the electoral process, causing political violence that led to abuse of human rights, distortion of the electoral process, and several killings during the period in Rivers State. The gross aim of the political parties was to manipulate the electoral process in favour of their parties, thereby encouraging deprivation of the people of their participatory right in the democratic process in the state.

Political Party: The Political party is a group of people from different backgrounds, who come together with a common political interest to contest and win elections, form the next government in the political system and control the powers of the government. In his view, Eegunlesi (2014, p. 17) sees political party as the association or organisation of politically minded people who share same political ideas, visions and goals with the ultimate intention of winning elections or electing their members to government positions. In a political party, the political interest of the members is paramount, particularly, the desire to control the affairs of the government, and use the party ideology to influence the actions of the government, when eventually the party wins the elections and forms the government.

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

Social Exclusion Theory

This theory is also referred to as the Social Marginalisation Theory and the two terms will be used interchangeably in this study. Saith (2001, p. 3) and Rawal (2008) stated that the term “Social Exclusion” was first used in the early 1970s in relation to an exclusion from the “norm” in France, and later adopted in other European States as a policy discourse. Room (1995) in O’Brien and Penna (2007:3) see the emergence of social exclusion or marginalisation as a social discourse due to its root in the functionalist theory of Emile Durkheim who was concerned with how social order and stability will be maintained in a society. The scholars added that the theory became prominent in Europe due to the failure of socio-economic and political institutions to make positive impact in the lives of socially disadvantaged group in the society. Saith (2001:3) states that Lenior (1974) was among the early scholars who used the theory to explain the marginalisation of those who were not protected by the modern welfare

state and seen as social misfits, and this added to the growing social instability in social relations in the state.

Francis (2002, p. 74) and Rawal (2008:164) see social exclusion as the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live. The scholars see both individuals and groups as possible victims of social marginalisation when they are deprived of participating in the socio-political and economic activities. According to Adler Institute on Social Exclusion (2010) "Social Exclusion is the process in which individual or entire community of people are systematically blocked from (or denied full access to) various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of a different group, and which are fundamental to social integration within that particular group". Similarly, Levitas, Pantazi, Fahmyi, Gordon, and Patsos (2007, p. 25) defined social exclusion as "a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationship and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individual and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole". In his view, Gala (2008) adds that marginalisation involves the activities which individuals and groups are ignored or relegated to the side-lines of political debates, social negotiation, and economic bargaining and are kept there. Categorically, Saith (2001) identified the socially excluded or marginalised as those who are resident in a geographical area, but for some reasons beyond their control are deprived opportunities to participate in normal activities they desire to participate. These definitions speak volume of the deprivation and marginalisation in the society arising from social inequality in power relations, and its effect on both the individuals and state. It results in more complexity, social disorder and instability, as those who are excluded from economic and political participation, and access to human rights often intensify agitations for inclusion in the state activities, thereby generating violence and social disorder in the state.

This study adopts the views of the above scholars on social exclusion or marginalisation, due to its applicability in Rivers State, during the 2015 General elections, and 2016 Rerun elections. The struggle for power by the various political parties in above elections resulted in the social exclusion of the citizens from the political activities in the state. The inter-play of political power in a quest for power supremacy heightened the struggle for survival and winning the elections in the state by the political parties. Within the period, the parties employed security agents (both state and non-state security agents) and other resources at their disposal to prosecute the elections in the state. This led to the exclusion of some Rivers State indigenes and residents from participating in the democratic process and climaxed in severe agitation by the deprived citizens for inclusion in the political activities. The result of this

deprivation and demand for inclusion was political violence, killings and abuse of human rights in Rivers State, with its attendant implications for the citizens and the state.

Methodology

The study uses both primary and secondary data. The primary data is the first-hand information collected for the purpose of this study. Observations made by the researcher during the elections served as the primary data. The secondary data covers a wide range of documents and information on the subject matter. Such data were collected from academic journals, newspapers, text books, political party newsletters and bulletin etc., and content analysis was applied in the analysis of the secondary data.

The Activities of Political Parties and Its Impact On Political Participation in Rivers State.

Abuse of party internal democracy: Aleyomi (2014, p. 352) holds that democracy is explained within the context of constantly involving the largest number of people in the management of their own affairs. Going by this definition, it is required that majority members of the party should be involved in the decision-making process of the party. There should be meetings and congresses where the majority members of the party will make their opinions known in the party, and decisions of the party be based on the decisions of the majority of party members. However, the study observed that the leadership of political parties in Rivers State engage in decision making without adequate involvement of the majority members of the party. While in the struggle and contest for power, the leaders of the party negotiate power for themselves, take decisions to favour their individual political desire and even mortgage the future chances of the party electoral victory. The overall goal is that the few members who are in the leadership of the political parties take decisions by themselves and for themselves against the interest of the majority, thereby excluding the majority in the decision making process and depriving them of effective political participation.

Manipulation of the Party Zoning and Office Allocation Formula: Every party has its own internal mechanism for office zoning and allocation to ensure its victory at the poll. Such decisions are usually contained either in their party's constitution or resolved in a party convention and is expected to involve majority members of the party. We observed that in most cases, the political parties come up with their zoning and office allocation strategy without the proper knowledge of their members. In 2015 general elections, the APC under the leadership of former Governor Rotimi Amaechi, who is from Ikwerre ethnic group tactically zoned the governorship candidate to Ibani (the Opobos) ethnic group to enable Dr. Dakuku Adol Peterside to emerge as the governorship candidate of the party. This unpopular decision was taken

because Amaechi Rotimi was the party leader in the state and wanted his friend and political son, Dakuku, to succeed him as governor in the state. The decision created a severe crisis in the state chapter of the party and made some members to abandon the party. Same was applicable in PDP, as Nyeson Wike, the then Minister of State for Education and leader of the party in the state, in collaboration with the National Secretariat of the party, using federal might, zoned governorship office of the party to the Ikwerre ethnic nationality to enable him (Nyeson Wike) emerge as the party flag bearer in the state. The implication is that the victory of PDP means another Ikwerre man to rule the state consecutively as the governor, after Governor Rotimi Amaechi. This decision received mix-reactions from the PDP members, as people from other ethnic groups in the state felt deprived and excluded from the party decision -making process. Many political parties adopted similar decisions in the zoning and allocation of party and elective offices in the state. These decisions of the parties met several negative reactions from both members and non-members of the parties. Indeed, the decisions succeeded in depriving the electorates their franchise, and the contesting candidates the opportunity to test their popularity in the party in particular and the state at large.

Loss of Party Ideology and Value: Party leaders abandon the party ideology to pursue their personal political interest in Rivers State. The leaders, particularly those who are the main financiers of the political parties use their positions to dictate the daily operations of the parties. They became the political godfathers that operate the political parties with their personal interest, rather than party interest. At the end, their personal interest overrides the party interest. They apply the unilateral decision to determine who should be expelled or suspended from the party and which member is to be admitted at what time into the party. The godfather sees the party as their personal property and should be administered same. At the end, the members are intimidated, forced out of the party and disciplined unnecessarily. The gross effect of the above actions is that the political parties' loss their ideologies and value before their members and electorates and thereby attracting low participation of the citizens in their political activities.

Political Party Leadership Crisis: Many political parties are engulfed in leadership crisis, which affects political participation in the state. Between 2014 and early 2015, PDP was enveloped in a leadership crisis of who has the power to function as the party chairman in the state, until the law court finally allotted the power of chairmanship to Hon Felix Obuah, whom some party members believed he – Hon Felix Obuah never contested the party chairmanship position. Despite the court judgement in favour of Obuah, many members of the PDP still felt marginalised. In Action Alliance (AA), Labour Party (LP), All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) etc., the leadership story was similar. At a point, some parties could not hold their party

primaries for the various offices for the 2015 general elections, thereby making such political parties not to present eligible and credible candidates for such offices. The leadership crisis in the parties weakened the party capacity to contest and struggle for political power with other parties in the state. This resulted in inability of party members to participate in the general and rerun elections in the state.

The Struggle for Supremacy and Conflict of Interest: Obviously, politics is all about political interest. In Rivers State, we observed that the persistent struggle for political supremacy and interest protection among political leaders within the party and inter-party levels exposes both the party members and the entire electorates to political difficulties in political participations in the state. In 2014, the political supremacy and clash of political interest between former Governor Rotimi Amaechi and Nyeson Wike, then minister of state for Education over who becomes the leader of PDP in the state, led to severe challenge to the party members, as the party was factionalised into Amaechi and Wike groups, leading to internal rivalry within the party. The allegiance to the party was diverted to individuals (either Amaechi or Wike) and later led to the crisis in the party that warranted for the defection of Amaechi group to APC in the state. In the process of this inter power play and tussle for supremacy and control, many party members became victims, as the clash of interest resulted to the deprivation of human rights, violence and killings among the supporters. The effect is that some eligible citizens were deprived of participation in the political process.

Political Scandal and Propaganda: During the election process, different political parties engaged in political propaganda and scandal of political opponents as a means of winning the conscience of the electorates to support their political party. These scandal and propaganda resulted to inter-party use of abusive words, and warrants for political violence between the various parties' supporters in the state. False and poor information management among the political parties became a source of concern in the political system as some of the members and supporters of the parties in some communities were misinformed about the party activities and line of actions, and they operated on misguided information to cause mayhem in their communities. Edizie (2016) stated that arising from the above; some angry youths of PDP in Elele and Ubima communities of Ikwerre ethnic nationality of the state engaged APC supporters in a violent combat. The study further noted that the APC youths later led reprisal attack on the PDP youths in the same and neighbouring communities leading to the death of many people and loss of properties in the communities. These events generated fear and discouraged the people of Elele, Ubima and neighbouring communities from participating in political activities for the fear of next possible attack in their areas. This same scenario repeated itself in many communities in the state including Rundele, Ibaa, Rumuepirikon, Omoku, Bodo City, etc.

Collaboration with Security Agents and Electoral Officers to Facilitate Electoral Fraud: In this study, electoral fraud is seen as the ill activities carried out by various agents during the electoral process to influence the result of the elections in favour of the disfavoured or unpopular individual or party. The study discovered that in the quest for winning elections and attaining political power, the political parties' leaders engaged the services of the electoral officers and security agents to actualise their interest. For the purpose of this study, the security agents imply – state security agents (the government approved security agents such as police force, Navy, Airforce, Army etc.), and non-state security agents (cult groups and gangs, ethnic militias etc.). The party leaders compromise the electoral officers to alter election results in their favour, produce election results where there was no election, misinform the electorates on the electoral process, and hide electoral materials, particularly at the polling-stations. This made Rotimi Amaechi in 2015 general election to call for the cancellation of some elections, as he alleged that the PDP used federal might to compromise the electoral officers and rig APC out in the elections. In 2016 re-run elections, Governor Nyeson Wike raised the same alarm accusing APC of compromising the electoral officers to favour APC during the election. Nyeson Wike, further called them “Electoral Armed Robbers” coming to Rivers State to facilitate electoral fraud in favour of the APC. At the end, there were cases of electoral fraud, distortion of the electoral process, and deprivation of human rights with its negative implications on the political participation of citizens of Rivers State. Similarly, the party leaders compromise the security agents to assist them to intimidate their political opponents, in some cases kidnap their opponents, hijack electoral materials and smash ballot papers and boxes. Most times, the cult groups and ethnic militia so hired by the various political parties clash and engage in a gun battle in various communities, leaving many electorates dead. Obiajuru (2016) affirmed this position as the scholar states that the 2015 general elections and 2016 re-run elections in Rivers State claimed many life and properties, and rendered many people homeless in the state. During the re-run elections held on 19th march, 2016, the South – East Senatorial District, covering the Ogoni and other ethnic nationalities witnessed accusations and counter accusations by PDP, APC and other political parties of using security agents to terrorise each other strong holds in some communities, and killing of their members in the process. This scenario led to inclusive elections in the entire senatorial district and other affected areas, thereby depriving the eligible citizens of the area, the right to vote and be voted for. In many wards in Emohua, Abua/Odual, Ogba/Egbema/ Obio/Akpor and Opobo/ Nkoro Local Government Areas, there were issues of ballot boxes smashing by the cult groups who disguised as members of Nigerian Army. In Omoku town of Ogba/Egbema Local Government Area, the intra-communal and inter-communal crisis has graduated to political violence and killings due to the involvement of different political party leaders with the cult groups to actualise their political interest.

Recommendations

- Internal democracy in political party activities should be encouraged by the party leaders by involving a majority of the party members in both decision making and implementation process. This approach will encourage political participation of members in the political activities of the party and enhance the party stability in its actions.
- Political parties should adhere to the terms and provisions of their constitutional provisions, and implement same as means to guide the party activities in the state. The implication is that it will reduce abuse of offices by the political leaders and sustain the party ideology and value to attract more members to the party for political participation.
- The engagement of the services of state security agents is good and necessary in an electoral process, as they are expected to protect lives and properties before, during and after the elections. However, the party leadership should not use the instrumentalities of the state to engage the services of state and non-state security agents to perpetuate electoral fraud, violence and deprive people their human rights in the political system of the state.
- Electoral fraud and violence are created sometimes by the party leaders in collaboration with the security agents and electoral officers to the detriment of the masses and the state. It is, therefore, our recommendation that the actors should be identified and punished to serve as a deterrent to other intending perpetrators to reduce electoral violence and fraud, and encourage the masses participation in the political activities in the state.
- The struggle for supremacy and conflict of interest is normal in a political organisation such as political party, as the members are made up of people from different background, with common political interest. Even when they have common political interest, some people always like the party interest to be in their favour, thereby subjecting others to abide by their command and not the party command, resulting to party internal crisis. We, therefore, recommend that since the conflict of interest and struggle for supremacy is inevitable at all levels of human gathering, including political party, the political party should institute and enforce effectively, adequate mechanism to resolve such issues with sincerity of purpose. This will reduce the party internal crisis and encourage effective mobilisation of the members for participation in the political activities of the state.

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