PDP Party Politics and the Subversion of Federalism in Nigeria

Ambrose I. Egwim
Department of Political Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University
Avakwa, Anambra State, Nigeria

This paper argues that party politics and election activities affect the practice of federalism. The exit of the military from government house has not terminated their centralizing and unitarizing tendencies, which they introduced in January 1966. The explanation for this continued centralization, despite having returned to democratic rule since May, 1999, may be found in the structure and organization of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the dominant political party, which has enjoyed near hegemonic power since May 1999: PDP controls of 28 out of the 36 states of Nigeria, and also controlled the National Assembly with a large majority. The military dictatorship did not end with military rule; rather it was transformed into a political party (PDP), manned by a former autocratic general who was being forced into a democratic mode.

Keywords: PDP, federalism, political party, party structure, Obasanjo presidency, ANPP, AD

Introduction

According to Duverger (1972:18), the classification generally adopted in connection with a party system distinguishes a plural party system from a one party system, but the notion of a dominant party serves a kind of bridge between plural and one party systems. In a pluralistic party system, at least two parties coexist with no single one enjoying an overwhelming or constant superiority over the others (or others), if one does predominate it then becomes a “dominant party”. Within pluralistic systems, a basic distinction is recognized between a two-party system and a multiparty system.

The scope of federal practice can be constrained by a number of factors, which actually will work in the direction of strengthening the central government. According to Akindele (1996:11) in all federal systems, the legal basis for governance and inter-governmental relations must be provided by a written constitution. But constitutional trends and developments are not shaped merely by precise amendments passed through carefully laid-down procedures, but also by practice over time, as well as by interpretation in appropriate courts in the federation. Students of federalism are bound to pay attention to political parties and party systems if they are to understand and come to grips with the dynamics of federalism and intergovernmental relations.

It has been well said that the most single important political factor that influences the pattern of IGR outside the constitutional text is the party system in each country and that the proximate cause of variation in the degree of centralization or peripheralization in the constitutional structure of a federalism is the variation in the degree of party centralization (Akindele, 1996).

Modern political parties cannot do without organization. Those who study party organization have been most concerned with the locus of power — how much power is found at each level, and who exercises it. According to Ujo (2000:59), while it is true that the formal structure depicts the graphic framework of the organization, excessive reliance on it may be deceptive, as it may not present a true
picture of the structure of the party. There is every possibility that informal structures exist side by side with the formal ones. There is, therefore, the need to watch out for such structures, and if found, to study how they influence the formal structure. A formal organizational structure could become outmoded and thereby fail to reflect the pattern of behaviour in the organization. Such formal structures may become the shadow rather than the substance of the organizational structure.

Most scholars tend to agree with Robert Michel that there is indeed an iron law of oligarchy, which endeavours to distinguish between loose knit cadre parties and more tightly articulated mass parties. The former are controlled by a small core of leaders (usually found at the head of the party’s legislative group) who are free to form policy with little interference but, also with occasional support from the broader membership. The latter have a larger, more active and more committed membership, which is supposedly better able to share in decisions made by the party’s elected leadership.

Other researchers have remarked on the phenomenon of the strataarchy, a decentralized party – where party policy is made differently and independently by every nuclear unit and has only a limited range of application and enforcement.

The distinction between mass and cadre is useful but, there is a third form of party organization characterized by centralized power, the vanguard party. In this type of party, a small group of power brokers at the party headquarters makes policy decisions, but all members are nevertheless expected to be fully and continuously devoted to the execution of party policy.

It seems, however, that the tendency for power to be concentrated or delegated within a party is closely linked to the nature of the government system within which the party operates. A decentralized federal government encourages the formation of decentralized parties, a centralized, unitary government fosters parties with power equally concentrated at the top (Lawson, 1976:77).

Both centralized and non-centralized party systems pose problems for federalism, although the latter is more congruent with the federal spirit (Akindele, 1996). The existence of a non-centralized party system, is perhaps the most important single element in the maintenance of federal non-centralization, while, for the most part, the centralized character of federalism is the direct result of the role of the centralized parties.

That the ‘federal principle’ was more fully realized in Nigeria during the First Republic (1960-1966) than elsewhere was due not simply to the constitutional distribution of powers between the two levels of government which was ‘generous’ to the regions but more crucially to the regionalization of the political party system, the dominant system of power up to January 1966. The increasing regional characteristic of the political parties not only strengthened the regions and gave them weight in their dealings with the federal government but also slowed down the trend towards centralization under the impact of national development planning. During the Second Republic the parties were non-centralized in manner that they cannot facilitate centralization and federal domination. The NPN was in control of only seven of the nineteen states (Akindele 1996:11).

Two functions are internal to the total organization of each party, (Sklar, 1963) namely:

1. The selection of candidates to contest elections (the nominating system) and
2. The enforcement of party discipline.

On the nomination system, attention must be paid on
   a. Extra-party control
   b. Procedures
   c. Criteria and requirement of selection
   d. Degree of central and local control
   e. Problems in local elections

On party discipline attention must also be paid on:
I. Offences
ii. Procedures
iii. The application of rules, regularity and frequency
v. Legislative group discipline.
Origins: Parties of the Fourth Republic: the People’s Democratic Party (PDP)

The PDP emerged as an offshoot of the G-34, a quasi-political group, which came to the scene in March 1998 with the aim of stopping the late Gen. Sani Abacha’s self-succession plot. Eminent Nigerians, such as Dr. Alex Ekwueme the Second Republic vice president, formed the nucleus. The G-34 enjoyed a huge following across the country. Many people, who identified with their cause to stop Abacha, regarded the G-34 as men and women of high integrity. The G-34 joined forces with 65 small associations to form what they hoped would become the leading political party in the country within 24 hours of the Justice Ephraim Akpata’s unveiling of the guidelines for formation of parties. Akpata was then the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

A former information minister, Prof. Jerry Gana, was named as the party secretary. Other notable top politicians included Chief Solomon Daushkop Lar, Chief Bola Ige, Alhaji Abubakar Rimi, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, Alhaji Adamu Ciroma, Alhaji Sule Lamindo, Chief Edwin Ume-Ezeoke, Dr. Iyorchia Ayu, Obong Victor Attah and Chief Tony Anenih. With the party set to zone the presidency to the south, the PDP effected leadership changes to reflect the principle of rotation. Lar took over from Ekwueme as national chairman.

All Peoples Party (APP) now the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP)

Shortly after it was formed, the PDP suffered a major setback. One of its principal pillars, the People’s Consultative Forum (PCF) led by a pan-Yoruba organization, Afenifere, and its allies in the Southern Leadership Forum (SLF), broke away before the party was launched. Ige, who headed the committee that drafted the PDP constitution, was among those who left with the PCF to form the All Peoples Party (APP) with other allies. However, the new political marriage broke up before it was consummated. Although Bola Ige contributed immensely to fashion the party’s constitution, shortly before the APP was launched in Abuja, the SLF pulled out of the alliance over an alleged influx of ‘Abacha politicians’ into the party. In the words of Lulu Briggs (2007: 58)

While the aim of the SLF was to give to the Nigerian people a political party, whose leadership comprises people of unquestionable integrity, the SLF suddenly, and sadly found itself in the midst of discredited people who have sneaked into the leadership of the proposed party.

In spite of the withdrawal of the SLF from the APP, it remained a force to be reckoned with, as notable politicians such as Alhaji Mahmud Waziri (pro tem national chairman), Alhaji Umaru Shinkafi, Dr. Olusola Saraki, Chief Emmnuel Iwuanyanwu, Alhaji Bashir Tofa, Senator Arthur Nzeribe, and Dr. Bode Olajumoke among others, stayed put. The party came in second behind the PDP in the 1999 elections in the country. Apart from Shinkafi and Tofa, most of the APP (now the All Nigerian Peoples Party—ANPP ) founders defected to the PDP.

Alliance for Democracy (AD)

Twelve hours to the deadline for the submission of forms to the INEC, the PCF/SLF leaders merged with the United Democratic Congress (UDC) led by Ambassador Jolly Tanko Yusuf and Ambassador Yusuf Mamman to form the AD. Established in a hurry, the leaders dusted off the PDP constitution, which they considered Ige’s brainchild, and submitted it to the electoral commission as its own constitution.

Emergence of Other Political Parties

According to Lawson (1976:68), besides originating inside parliaments or outside in a variety of groups and movements, parties also originate from inside other parties (splitting). Some splinter parties achieve semi-permanent status; others make their point (or fail to) and are reabsorbed by either the parent or by another major party in the system. Most new parties that emerged after the 1998/99 polls were splinters from PDP, as summarized by Lawson (1976).

When those who have taken a particular side in a controversy that divides the populace along new lines, believe that they have the resources to warrant forming an organization and seeking
popular approval for placing at least one of their own members in an official government position then a new party will be formed.

What and how much one needs to form a party with a chance of success will depend upon the nature of the constitutional arrangements, the electoral system in force, the strength of pre-existing political loyalties, the party’s ability to employ expertise of the mass media, and host of other variables.

The PDP approached the 1998/99 polls as a united front and recorded remarkable victories. The foundation for the victories was laid at the party’s December 1998 National Convention / presidential primaries in Jos, capital of Plateau State. Chief Sunday Awoniyi, who willingly allowed Lar to emerge as PDP chairman, chaired the convention. The primaries were free and fair, and Ekwueme, who lost the presidential ticket to Chief Olusegun Obasanjo accepted his defeat with fanfare and embraced the victor.

A year later during the party’s national convention, the Obasanjo presidency insisted that Lar should hand-over the chairman’s seat. Awoniyi felt he was the natural successor but Obasanjo felt otherwise and backed Chief Barnabas Gemade. Awoniyi felt betrayed and misgivings from the event led to his expulsion along with Ume-Ezeoke, Don Etiebet and Sheik Jerma, among other leaders, from the party.

In an interview in the Guardian in 2007, Awoniyi reflected back on the early days of the party:

At inception, the PDP was dreamed to look like the African National Congress of South Africa. It was to be a huge mass movement that is people-oriented,

Likewise, Ekwueme was disillusioned and had tactically withdrawn from playing an effective role in the affairs of the party:

When we midwived the PDP, the intention was that it would be a party that would be all-inclusive, it would not be exclusionary. Nobody was going to be left no matter the person’s antecedents (Briggs, 2007:52).

By May 2001, some party officers were suspended from office. They were Emmanuel Ibeshi, former national publicity secretary, Gbenga Olawepo and (the late) Dr. Harry Marshall, former national vice chairman (south). A court order reinstated the officers, but the Gemade leadership did not approve of it. It was the regime of former chairman, Audu Ogbeh, which made some attempts to reconcile these officers and members who had been sent out of the party. The good intentions of Ogbeh’s policy of reconciliation and re-integration did not work, as there were already entrenched interests that would not make re-integration of the former members possible. It was only Tukur, who made it back to the party.

Members of the party in the National Assembly, such as former House of Representatives speaker, Ghali Umar Na’Abba, were denied re-election tickets in 2003 and others were shut out during the party’s membership revalidation. Even Chief Audu Ogbeh, who emerged as the party chairman with the support of Obasanjo, was forced to quit in the heat of the crisis. When Ogbeh was replaced with a caretaker chairman, Dr. Ahmadu Ali, a former military colleague of Obasanjo, the perception of increasing presidential control began to gain substance.

When the agitation for a power shift among the zones got intense in 2004, in a speech to the party convention held in Abuja in early December of that year, Obasanjo asked party members to trust him as the party leader, to interpret the issue of selection of the appropriate presidential candidate at the right time.

Some of the aggrieved founders were unhappy with Obasanjo’s tagging himself as the ‘father of the party and the nation.’

Vice-President Atiku Abubakar led the opposition to scuttle Obasanjo’s alleged third term agenda through the National Assembly. Consequently, Abubakar was totally sidelined and some of the party’s most effective members were rendered impotent or completely coerced into silence or compliance. Together with the PDP governors, Abubakar was instrumental to Obasanjo’s re-election in 2003. He had urged the governors to back him in the party primaries in 2002. Obviously, in doing that,
Abubakar expected power to shift to the North in 2007 with him being the main beneficiary.

Abubakar was forced to team up with the Action Congress (AC) when it became clear to him that Obasanjo would not support his ambition for the presidency. Indeed, Abubakar had allegations of corruption and disloyalty to the PDP levelled against him. The PDP suspended Abubakar for three months, long enough for the parties to have concluded fielding candidates for 2007 polls. He emerged as the presidential flag bearer of AC. Having crossed party lines, led some aides of the president to try to remove him as the vice president, which the courts resolved in favour of the Abubakar.

Uncomfortable with these scenarios, disaffected members left the PDP for opposition parties or to form new parties as the Advanced Congress of Democrats (ACD), Movement for Restoration of Democracy and Justice (MRDJ) and Action Congress (AC). The leadership of the AC is predominantly made up of ex-PDP stalwarts. They included Vice President Abubakar; former governor of old Kano State, Abubakar Rimi; former governor of old Kaduna state Lawal Kaita; former Speaker of House of Representatives, Ghali Umar Na’Abba, and many others.

The Obasanjo Presidency, PDP as a Dominant Party and Nigerian Federalism

Party structure / organization

The exit of the military from the rulership of Nigeria has not terminated the centralizing tendencies of government, which they introduced into Nigeria in 1966 (The Patriot, 2000). The question may then be asked, why has the practice of government not been consonant with the ‘true federalism’? The explanation for the continued centralizing tendency of Nigerian federalism, despite having returned to democratic rule on May 29, 1999, may be seen in the hegemonic structure and power enjoyed by the dominant PDP party— having won 28 out of the 36 states and the majority of seats in the National Assembly.

The structure and organization of Nigerian political parties follow the pattern expected in a federation. The party is structurally aligned along the existing tiers of government: federal, state, local, and the wards – in descending order. Each unit reports to immediate higher unit. Correspondingly, power is supposed to be reasonably decentralized, and each unit enjoys a reasonable degree of autonomy. Thus the decisions of a unit ought not to be overturned by the immediate or any higher unit without due investigation and consultation (Amucheazi, 2006:16). Nevertheless, in contrast to supposed reasonable decentralization with regard to the federal structure of the country, the practice in recent times, as exemplified by the PDP, shows centralism (Amucheazi, 2006). The national working committee of the PDP has ignored the outcomes of the primaries at the lower constituencies and imposed its own candidates for all the elections, national, state and even local government. Amucheazi (2006:16) has noted that the PDP has fallen into the hands of an oligarchy that takes decisions without any consultation:

The so called iron law of oligarchy in organizations seems to have been exemplified, though for the wrong reasons, that is not because of the demands of discipline in and success of the organization and mastery of rules and expert knowledge by the leadership but because of corruption and brigandage.

The obvious consequences of this as he noted are:

The factionalization of the party as party members try to outbid one another for party posts, ministerial and board appointments etc.

In the state there is constant struggle between the governor who is the leader of the party and the young millionaires who bought the chairmanship from the centre.

Another consequence is the election and appointment of unqualified persons to positions of responsibility to the detriment of the interest of the people.

Party leaders often confound the situation by Inducing the selection committee to adopt a candidate who may be in good standing with the party hierarchy, but does not have the popular support of his constituency. When popular candidates are
defeated, local party leaders react by appointing parallel candidates and the party spends valuable time settling candidate claims and counterclaims, which never get settled. It is not enough for aspirants to be entrenched in the grassroots; they must, in addition, understand how to play the ‘Abuja game’.

The party constitution adds a lot more to the powers of its national leaders. Article 17.1 of the PDP codes says the decision on who eventually flies the party flag in any election rests with the National Executive Council (NEC), and NEC means, effectively Ali, president Obasanjo and to some extent, Chief Tony Anenih, chairman of the PDP Board of Trustees (Briggs, 2007:51). This removes the choice of the governor of a state from the people in individual states to the centre. The military dictatorship did not end with the military rule; rather it has been transformed into a political party (PDP) manned by oligarchy of party elites. The party primaries provide the best opportunity for Chairman Ali to operate as a maximum ruler. Aspirants, who wished to remain in the PDP electoral clique, did most of their campaigning at PDP headquarters in Abuja. Several weapons were employed to force those who pretended to have a mind of their own, to yield to the mainstream intrigues. The preprimary screening, for instance, was specially woven to ensure that only those that got a clean bill from the screening committee would advance to the next stage of the contest. ‘Recalcitrant’ party members, who refused to deliver on major party assignments including the failed tenure extension project at the National Assembly, were brought down. This included Aminu Bello Masari, House of Representatives Speaker, who lost the governorship for Katsina state. The primaries were also times to settle scores with state governors, who had been difficult to manage. The heat became so unbearable for Governor Orji Uzo Kalu of Abia State that he had to seek refuge in a fresh platform – The Progressive People’s Alliance (PPA), where he was the presidential flag bearer. Vice-President Abubakar, was screened out of the PDP through non-revalidation of membership, suspension and eventual expulsion from the party.

Chairman Ali’s wife, who did not even contest the senatorial primaries, was declared the candidate for Delta North.

In Imo state, the former president of the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), Chief Charles Ugwu, was picked by the leaders of the party in Abuja as the party’s gubernatorial candidate, while Senator Ifeanyi Ararume, who scored the highest votes at the primaries, was not named the party candidate. The Group accused the governor, Chief Achike Udenwa of having interest in the emergence of another candidate. However, the state commissioner for information, George Egu, said the development was a decision taken by stakeholders who met in Owerri:

In the primary, there was no clear winner and the party did not order for a run-off. Imo stakeholders in the PDP took the decision, not the governors.

Araraume scored highest in the primary held at the Dan Anyiam Stadium, Owerri, by scoring 2,061 while the nearest candidate, Chief Hope Uzodinma had 1,649, and Chief Tony Ezenna got 1,388 to place third. Ugwu scored only 36 votes. Arararume had scored the highest votes among the 22 aspirants. He was, however, not declared winner because he did not have 50 per cent of the vote. INEC displayed Araraume’s name as the party’s candidate for the governorship at the INEC offices in Abuja and Owerri.

At the national convention (primaries) the PDP came with a ‘family arrangement’ that saw the December 16, 2006 epic contest dissolve into a simple selection process. Persons that were grossly short-changed included Governor Odili, Victor Attah and Donald Duke – all contestants from the South-South geopolitical zone. Even when the slot for the vice-president was being considered, those who were denied the opportunity of the presidency were not on the bill. It went to the lucky Goodluck Jonathan, who did not even participate in the race.

This necessitated the classification of political parties into ‘democratic’ and ‘dictatorial’ by
Amucheazi (n.d.) in one of his numerous postgraduate lectures. Dictatorial parties bring order out of the chaos of multiple voters and broker ideas, constantly classifying, systematizing and expanding the party’s doctrines. Inevitably, dictatorial parties tend to think about a new society. The competitors in politics become more inflexible. The struggle assumes the quality of a religious war; the only possible outcome for any contestant seems to be an overwhelming victory or ultimate annihilation. Dictatorial parties endeavor to seize power and become a revolutionary vanguard of the future state. Dictatorial parties plan for monolithic control: integration of the individual to them means the enforcement of conformity through various state agencies of enlightenment and one-way propaganda from above. Dictators talk about public opinion. The only problem is that they try through their secret agents to make those opinions. Certainly, the PDP under Obasanjo turned into a dictatorial party against a ‘people-oriented mass movement’ as envisioned by its founders.

Conclusion
What is being show here is that through the machinery of a political party, the president can install a personality cult both in the country and the party in which there is no room for dissent or alternative views of governance. Under ‘selective electioneering’ the so-called representatives do not represent the interests they are supposed to protect, for fear of being replaced in the next election. Consequently, the democratic room (the National Assembly, the National Economic Council, [NEC], the National Council of State, the Revenue Mobilization, Allocation and Fiscal Commission [RMAFC]) established for resolving conflicting interests in inter-governmental relations were controlled by the president. And what that means is that issues on fiscal allocation/resource control, local government creation and control etc remained unresolved.

The future of Nigeria federalism lies in competitive, issue-based political parties that will seek the mandate of the people to tackle national problems raised during the election campaign. The election of the party at the national level will serve as an approval of policies they wish to implement.

References
Amucheazi, E. (n.d) Post graduate lecture monograph. Department of Political Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
Newspapers
Biographical Note
Ambrose I. Egwim is a Master of Science (M.sc) degree student Department of Political Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.