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**INTER-PARTY DIALOGUE IN NGERIA:
EXAMINING THE PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE**

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1

Introduction

My starting point will be a number of general comments about the history, functions and responsibilities of political parties in Nigeria, as the broader context for indicating a framework for approaching the problem of inter-party dialogue in the country and posing questions about not only its desirability and framework but also the framework for pursuing and putting flesh into it.

Section 2 attempts to define political parties and to indicate their significance for liberal democracy. *Section 3* offers a sketch of the historical sociology of the development of political parties in Nigeria, in terms of their “developmental circumstances.” *Section 4*, offers some observations on the functions and responsibilities of Nigerian political parties. *Section 5* looks at the justification for and scope of inter-party dialogue, in the broader context of party reform as an aspect of constitutional, electoral governance, and political reform; while *Section 6*, the concluding section, poses questions about what should go into the design of the architecture of inter-party dialogue in Nigeria.

2

Party: Concept and Origins

“*What is a party?*” The answer depends on whether one offers a structural or functional definition of the notion of a political party, and how such a definition is linked to or influenced by the development of democracy. [See, Epstein 1967:14-15].

In the west a political party has generally been defined more in functional than in structural terms, with two core elements, namely that a political party helps to (a) structure electoral choice and (b) conduct the business of government, under a party label or banner. A party needs not perform both functions but generally all parties tend to perform both functions, *more or less*. In short, the core functions of a political party, not its organizational structures, are what typically distinguish a political party as a conceptual category from other organizations. It also follows from the functional definition that the significance of political parties for liberal democracy is that under conditions of competitive party and electoral politics, a political party (i) presents the electorate with a choice of candidates and programmes from which to choose; and in doing so (ii) helps to decide which party or coalition of parties should govern for a fixed number of years. In other words, this functional definition of the party is predicated on the assumption of the competitiveness of the electoral process.

Thus, in a liberal democratic system, the party provides the medium through which the accountability of the executive and the legislators to the electorate is exercised through periodic elections under a multiparty electoral politics. This is of course the theory. The reality is and can be much different, because of the constricting effect on the choice of the electorate of (i) contradictions such as oligarchic and undemocratic tendencies in political party organization; and (ii) market imperfections and structural distortions in the economic organization of the liberal democratic state.

A useful framework for analyzing the historical sociology of Nigerian political parties is provided by the following “*developmental circumstances*,” adapted from Epstein [1967:19-43], which molded the character of the country’s political parties (i) the colonial experience, particularly the anti-colonial movement and enlargement of the suffrage; (ii) changes in a country’s social structure, reflected in the rise of an educated elite, and the challenge they posed to traditional chieftaincy authority, and the emergence of the military as a ruling class ; and (iii) federalism.

3

Outline of the Historical Sociology of Party in Nigeria

Constitutional reform and the meaning of party in Nigeria:

Because of the centrifugal consequences of the ethno-regionalization and the personalization of party politics, particularly between 1951 and 1965, Nigeria has moved, since the constitutional and political reforms of 1975-1979, from a functional definition of a political party to a legal- constitutional one, which primarily defines party more in terms of structure than of functions, with emphasis on structural requirements for political party registration as (i) national outlook and spread; (ii) internal organization or democracy, and (iii) recognition and registration by an electoral body. But as Nigeria’s experience since 1979 has shown, there are limitations to the social engineering assumptions of the structural definition of party.

Developmental circumstances of party in Nigeria

The colonial experience: The foundational “developmental circumstance” of party in Nigeria is colonial rule and the opposition to it by the country’s nationalist movement, which transmuted into political associations to contest for legislative elections as the country progressed between 1922 and 1960 from non-representative government (legislative council), through representative government and responsible government to independence, under competitive party and electoral politics. Ngou [1989] estimates that including the three [major] political parties, a total of fifteen others contested the ‘critical’ election of 1959. However, the more prominent of the parties in this emergent multiparty system between 1922 and 1960 were the Nigerian National Democratic Party (1923), the People’s Union (1923), Union of Young Nigerians (1923), the Nigerian Youth Movement (1937), the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (1944), the Northern Elements Progressive Association (1945), the Northern Elements Progressive Union (1950), the Action Group (1951), the Northern Peoples’ Congress (1951), the United National Independence Party (1953), the United Middle Belt Congress (1955), formed through the merger between the Middle Belt League (1950) and the Middle Belt People’s Party (1953)., Bornu Youth Movement (1956), the

Dynamic Party (1955), and the National Democratic Party of Nigeria and the Cameroons (1958). [Azikiwe, 1961:301-334, Hodgkin, 1961:195-197]

Impact of social structure: Another critical “developmental circumstance,” of the party in Nigeria is the country’s social structure, which can be disaggregated variously into class, religion, language, ethno-communal, rural/urban divide, ideology, and educational levels. But the emergent political parties from the mid-1920s reflected the dominance of the nationalist movements by a combination of petit-bourgeois middle class and proletarian strata of the country’s social structure. Yet the logic of competitive party and electoral politics and the unfolding ethno-federal political structure in the country meant that the emergent political parties had to cultivate the support of traditional rulers and traditional institutions, as part of their electoral strategy. This comes out clearly in the close, sometimes symbiotic relationship between ethno-cultural associations or organizations and a number of political parties, which, like the Action Group and the Northern Peoples’ Congress grew out of or became the political wings of these cultural organizations.

Although class and ideological divisions seemed not to have been significantly salient elements of the social structure of Nigeria, there is a sense in which the emergent party system in the 1950s and 1960s reflected class and ideological differences. While most of the Nigerian parties during this period were what might be characterized as elite parties, with the exception of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), a rough distinction can be drawn between conservative parties like the Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC) and centrist ones like the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) and the Action Group (A.G.), based on their manifestoes and programmes.

That class and ideological cleavages were insignificantly salient, in spite of the sometime close alliance of some of the parties, like the NCNC, with the leadership of the trade union movement, might not be unrelated to the pervasive salience of ethnicity, which cuts across class and other social divisions in the country.

Ethnicity, federalism and party: Ethnicity, therefore, is a major element of the country’s social structure, which has had a profound impact on the origins and developmental trajectory of political parties in Nigeria, and on the practice of federalism in the country. The intersection of ethnicity, federalism and party politics illustrates another aspect of the “developmental circumstance” of political parties in Nigeria. Indeed this intersection accounts, by and large, for the substantial ethnic origin or power base of not only the three major parties—the AG, the NCNC and the NPC—but also a number of parties like the Bornu Youth Movement (UMBC), United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), and the United National Independence Party (UNIP). The impact of the process of the ethno-regionalization of Nigerian politics set in motion by the 1946, 1951 and 1954 Constitutions no doubt encouraged and contributed to the emergence of ethnic based parties in the country

This ethno-regionalist orientation of the parties, reflected in the fact that the national leaders of all the 3 major parties preferred to stay in the regions, becoming regional

premiers, impacted in turn on the country's federal system: between 1954 and 1960: its emphasis on regional autonomy resulted in strong unit level or regional governments, with the consequential weakening of the central government. As Watts [1966:340] puts it, "the main effect of the party system [between 1954 and 1959] was 'to provide three powerful organizations intent on maintaining regional rights.'"

Yet by 1960, there was going on a simultaneous process of the regionalization and federalization of party politics and of the party system in the country. Although the major parties retained their regional strength, competitive logic of federal party electoral politics forced these parties to become national and to look for alliances, particularly among minority ethnic group-based parties, outside of their regional base in order to strengthen their national electoral vote. The result of this federalization of the party system was a de facto two-party system, cutting across ethno-communal lines, at the federal level, and a single-dominant party system, reflecting majority ethnic group solidarity, at the regional or unit level, with the notable exception of the West, where the NCNC was strong.

It is the contradictions unleashed from 1962 onwards by this federalization of the party system—the declaration of emergency rule in the Western Region in 1962, the creation of the Mid-West Region in 1963, the 1962-63 census controversy, the party realignment before the 1964 regional elections and the 1965 federal elections, involving the alliance between the NCNC and the A.G, on the one hand, and the NPC and the rump of the NCNC and AG in the new NNDP, on the other hand—that contributed significantly to the political and constitutional crisis and the civil unrest of October-December 1965, which precipitated the fall of the First Republic in January 1966.

Impact of military rule on party: It is in order to de-emphasize the dysfunctional or centrifugal salience of ethnicity in party politics, based on the experience of the First Republic, that military-brokered transitions in the country in 1975-1979 and 1985-1999 tried to proscribe or discourage the formation of ethnic-based parties. The proscription has involved the attempt to engineer political parties with national outlook through a number of structural or organizational requirements, which political associations seeking recognition and registration as political parties would have to satisfy, and to create the environment conducive to free and fair elections and to the reduction of electoral violence that engulfed the country between 1962 and 1965.

Other structural reforms of the post-military party system were intended to (i) facilitate internal democracy within the political parties, through requirements like party conventions and party nomination primaries, and the establishment of a party bureaucracy, involving a distinction between career politicians and party technocrats; (ii) engendering a new political culture through encouraging and nurturing the emergence of a "new-breed" of politicians, with a more positive and system-supporting orientation to politics; and (iii) emphasize issues-based or ideological *differentiae*, to distinguish one party from the other, and to de-emphasize the personalization of party politics..

The objectives of these reforms of the party system, brokered under military-initiated democratic transitions in the country have not (i) resolved the problem of the political

mobilization of ethnicity as a salient factor in Nigeria's competitive party and electoral politics, although they may have domesticated it within the parties; (ii) brought about internal democracy within the parties; (iii) reduced election-related violence; (iv) created an atmosphere conducive to inter-party dialogue and credible competitive party and electoral governance. However, if the 1975-1979 did not completely remove the old divide in party politics, as was clear in the composition of the major political parties that emerged as clones of the parties during the *ancien regime*, the post-1987 as well as the post-1999 political parties reflected some break from the political parties of the First Republic.

4

Functions and Responsibilities of Political Parties in Nigeria

From the two defining elements of party enumerated in Section I flow the following secondary functions or responsibilities of political parties in Nigeria: (i) recruitment or reproduction of the political class; (ii) membership recruitment; (iii) patronage disbursement; (iv) organization--party bureaucracy; (v) involvement in policy formulation; (vi) voter education and mobilization; and (vii) protecting and defending the country's constitution.

How well have Nigerian political parties undertaken these functions and responsibilities? The conclusion of Patrick Ollawa [1989:161] about political parties under the Second Republic is worth quoting at some length: if only to illustrate the persistence of some serious institutional and psycho-cultural weaknesses and distortions in the development and practice of the party and competitive party politics and of liberal democracy since the early 1960s

The paradox of party politics in the Second Republic is that despite a well-intentioned constitutional attempt to evolve a party system, which would promote stable contest between parties, presumably characterized by different programmes manifested in issue-oriented ideologies...what emerged in practice was transactional politics based on opportunistic and informal networks of politicking replete with intra-party factionalism that constantly led to shifting alliances, a situation which unavoidably supplanted the formal structures of party organization....the basic problem centered on the subversion and perversion of the intrinsic values and principles governing the operation of the system by politicians, whose party affiliations were rooted more in the pursuit of financial rewards, opportunities and linkages in dyadic relation to some party notables."

5

Justifying Inter-Party Dialogue

It is clear from the foregoing that party reform to deepen democracy in the country remains an unfinished progress, and that there is a deepening gap between Nigeria's theory and practice of democracy. It is not that inter-party dialogue is a new idea in inter-party relations in Nigeria. In fact, much of it goes on in structured forums, such as in

parliamentary committees, constitutional reform conferences, workshops, among others, and in less obvious unstructured or informal ones among party leaders and members of different political parties. What is novel about the idea of inter-party dialogue is the need to institutionalize and routinize it as a confidence- and consensus-building feature of the electoral governance process. However, one cannot talk about it and of the processes for pursuing it in isolation but in the broader context of party reform, as a core aspect of constitutional, electoral governance and political reform in the country.

An important step towards, indeed precondition of inter-party dialogue is indeed party reform that focuses on creating an environment conducive to constructive intra-party dialogue. If intra-party dialogue is not well compacted and managed, one cannot but expect that it will negatively impact inter-party dialogue. Before examining the justification for inter-party dialogue, one must say a little bit about the justification for intra-party dialogue as a pre-condition for inter-party dialogue.

This requires focus on the following as effective antidotes to the aggravation and dysfunctionality of manifest conflict and conflict-prone intra-party dialogue:

- (a) A new political and legal culture, which anchors party politics on the demands and dictates of constitutional government: ethics, accountability, transparency, tolerance of diversity, inclusiveness, and the rule of law.
- (b) Going back to the party reform of 1987-1993 anchored on a decentralized party structure and administration, where party membership is at the ward level. It means the application of internal democracy within, in the form of the faithful application of the principles of separation of powers and checks and balances among the various administrative hierarchies of the party at local government, state and federal levels should structure and govern the constitutions, operations and party political activities of the parties, and should be applied as well to the conduct of their electoral processes for nominating candidates for public political offices. This is a basic component of what internal democracy should mean in the reformed party system.

Based on the two requirements above, I restate the following framework for party reform, borrowed from the 1987-1993 reform and which, more often breached with impunity than respected and obeyed, remains the foundation for our current party system”

- (a) **Building party discipline and cohesion:** Party discipline based on due process is the foundation for party cohesion, both of which are vital for the sustainability of federalism and democracy in the country. Party discipline, as the foundation for party cohesion requires faithful compliance with the letter and spirit of party constitutions, which in turn must be informed by the broad democratic principles enshrined in Chapters II and IV of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.
- (b) **Party Structure and Administration:** With party membership at the ward level, the party structure and administration should be aggregated upwards from the ward through the local government and state levels to the federal (national) level, with each subsidiary level integrated, through membership, into the party

- structure and administrative machinery at upper levels of the party's hierarchy. In this way autonomy at each level is complemented by shared rule at the proximate higher level of the party's governance structure, in what is essentially the application of the federal principle to party governance. The party structure and administration at each level must be autonomous within the spheres of competence assigned to it by the party's constitution, with provisions made for checks and balances by the other levels on the exercise of the autonomy.
- (c) **Party Congresses and Conventions:** Party congresses and conventions at local government, state and federal levels are mechanisms for managing diversity, accountability and inclusion in the governance of the political parties, including relevant party electoral processes for party and public political offices. Their membership should reflect diversity and be based primarily on the elective principle.
 - (d) **Credible party primaries:** The decentralized or federalized party structure already outlined implies that, while the national executive committees of the political parties should issue guidelines for the primaries of each party, to ensure uniformity nationwide within the party, the power to organize the primaries should reside in the relevant or appropriate party congresses, e.g. for gubernatorial elections, in the state congresses of the parties. The electorate for the primaries should be limited, of course, to registered and financially current members of each party. This places the onus of compiling credible and authentic voters' registers for their party primaries by the parties, in ways that will engender confidence in the conduct of free and fair primaries, in much the same way as such registers are critical to the conduct of free and fair general elections by INEC. A major issue is whether prospective candidates for party primaries should be charged levies, as a precondition for eligibility to contest in the primaries. There is perhaps a case to be made for the view that the imposition of such levies is against the spirit of the primaries and that it can be used to deliberately exclude or discourage some prospective candidates, and may in fact violate the rights and privileges of party members. For the organization of their primaries, the political parties should earmark a portion of their annual grant provided for under Section 228(c) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and embark on aggressive fund-raising activities, within limits imposed by statutory provisions and regulations on party financing, as another source from which to fund their primaries.

Stipulating this framework is not enough, as various fractions within the political parties would strive to find ways to subvert reform elements in the framework, unless there are external disincentives to discourage them. It is here that the constitutionally stipulated powers and functions of INEC to monitor and regulate "the organization and operation of the political parties, including their finances," and their "political campaigns," and to "provide rules and regulations which shall govern the political parties," become critical in interposing an external regulatory and oversight public interest into party political activities and their governance generally. [1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Third Schedule, Part 1, Section F, 15(b)-(c)] Perhaps, to reemphasize a point made earlier, INEC has been too reticent and unduly reactive in exercising these powers

in the past several years. It now needs, together with the Political Parties Regulatory Commission, when created, to be more assertive, even more aggressive and proactive in this respect. No less important is the moral force of public opinion, directed towards defending the public interest, and acting as pressure driving the political parties towards it.

The justification for inter-party dialogue in Africa has typically been that, taken alongside code of conduct for political parties and the provisions of the electoral law, it is an important conflict-prevention, conflict-resolution and confidence-building mechanism for bringing about cross-party cooperation for the consolidation and sustainability of democracy and development. This is why the searchlight has been turned on it in African countries, such as Ghana, Malawi, our own country Nigeria, Kenya, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Uganda as a democracy-promoting mechanism. Thus among key points that emerged from the November 2009 Colloquium on African Elections: Best Practices and Cross-Sectoral Collaboration, in Accra, Ghana, were the following: (i) meetings among political parties, the election commission, and civil society representatives can build trust among the various elections stakeholders; (ii) structured multiparty dialogue can prevent conflict and election violence; and (iii) dialogue platforms between political parties and EMBs are the best vehicle to prevent election violence.

6

Design Questions Relating To The Architecture of Inter-Party Dialogue.

What follows is an outline of a framework for the institutionalization of inter-party dialogue in Nigeria. Factors to take into account will be:

- (a) Political parties to include in the dialogue and who should represent them;
- (b) Other stakeholders to include, or should it be restricted to political parties, with other forums provided for institutionalized and routinized dialogue between them and the political parties;
- (c) Should the dialogue be institutionalized, e.g. as an Inter-Party Dialogue Forum or Forum for Inter-Party Dialogue?
- (d) Should dialogue be centralized, limited to the federal/national executive committees of the political powers or devolved downwards to state and local government levels, and even to the ward level, to reflect the country's federal structure and electoral governance coverage?
- (e) What should be the functions of the dialogue, if institutionalized?
- (f) Regularity and venue of the meeting?
- (g) What are the incentives for taking part in the dialogue?
- (h) Establishing and staffing a secretariat for the dialogue, and should it be professionalized?
- (i) Who funds the dialogue and its secretariat?
- (j) What rules of procedure should guide its deliberations;
- (k) Who implements its decisions?
- (l) Who serves as watchdog of the dialogue, and with what power: moral suasion or legal sanctions.

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