

Rescuing the Electorate from the Political Party: The Imperative of Political Education for Voter De-Alignment in Nigeria

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Abstract

One of the organs of political education is the political party. Political parties are also the candle lights that lead and provide guidance to the majority of the electorate when general elections are imminent. Through their manifestos, they raise national consciousness by shedding more light on the activities and plans of the incumbent or in-coming governments. Despite the performance of these functions by political parties in Nigeria, democratic governance over the years has reflected a divergence from the promises made to the electorate while mirroring the deeply ingrained partisan voter alignment that asserts the interests and dominance of the 'few' to the detriment of those of the majority. The propositions of the elite theory and the dominant-ideology and sociological models provide the basis on which the renegation of campaign promises by the elected individuals thrives. The paper reiterates the calls for professional political education to improve the *status quo*. The processes focusing on voter de-alignment and realignment should engage the electorate through (re)socialization mechanisms that enhance their capacities for the in-depth evaluation of politics and related issues. Further, they should reposition the electorate on the requisite pedestal which on one hand affords effective political exchange, interactions and renegotiations for their future and on the other, does not relegate them. The recommendations of the paper include political counseling proposals for empowering the electorate with modalities for redefining and reestablishing beneficial relationships with their political leaders. The proper implementation of these strategies is expected to elicit tangible political sensitization, value-reorientation of the electorate and a redesign of Nigeria's political landscape that will culminate in the achievement of political-cum-socio-economic growth and development.

Keywords: party manifestos, political education, political counseling, value re-orientation, voter realignment, socio-political development

Introduction

Formal or informal education resonates in all facets of human endeavour and is the bedrock upon which human behaviour is developed. Putnam (quoted in Campbell, 2006) observes:

'Education is one of the most important predictors – usually, in fact, the most important predictor – of many forms of social participation – from voting to associational membership, to chairing a local committee, to hosting a dinner party, to giving blood...'

The essence of education of any kind – political education inclusive – is to ensure a degree of behavior modification that determines a relationship between attitudes, behavioral intentions and behavior (Dekker, 1991). Political education as with socialization, is influenced by the family, media, school, religious and peer groups, workplace relationships, and so forth. Pandey and Kumar, (1977) hold that political education is a process whereby people learn several matters including how to socialize within political culture, how to think and act on politics and government, how to adapt to the political process, how to shape political systems and how to make decisions. Dag, Sozer & Sel (2015) describe political education as a process through which citizens internalize the set of values of the political system. Pacho (2014) noted that political education enables the sensitization of individuals to their rights, duties and obligations as enshrined in Article 21 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states the rights of individuals to partake in the government of his or her own country directly or through freely elected representatives.

What is paramount in the positions of these scholars is the notion of political education representing a socialization process through which individuals acquire knowledge about the political happenings around them, about responsibilities attached to rights, and about the formation of appropriate responses towards the different political processes. Political education or socialization therefore implies processes for the development of political beliefs and opinions that influence behavior in social spheres. It combines several factors working together to produce belief systems that ultimately guide the attitudes and actions of stakeholders in the political process. These factors engender, define the trajectories and mould the impressions, outcomes and political makeup of individuals in the political arena.

Owen (2009) described political socialization as a process through which knowledge about the political system and its workings are acquired, society's value system and ideology are internalized, its symbols and rituals are understood, information about the roles of the active and passive members of society is got and decisions to participate in political and civil life, made. She further held that in the twenty-first century, political socialization takes place at the micro and macro levels with the micro occurring at the individual level while the macro signifies the system-level processes. Dekker (1991) evaluated political socialization as being two-pronged – direct and indirect. The direct involves the acquisition of knowledge and all other values that are purely political in nature. The indirect on the other hand, describes 'the acquisition of knowledge, opinions, skills, attitudes, behavioural intentions and patterns that are not in themselves political but exert a significant influence on the subsequent acquisition of specific political knowledge and so forth.'

That political parties prospect and stabilize democracies cannot be overemphasized. The ACE Encyclopaedia describes a political party as an organized group of people with similar aims and opinions that include influencing public policy through candidates elected to public office. Political parties play a crucial role in democracy-building. Hofmeister & Grabow, (2011) observed that the establishment of a modern representative democracy is inconceivable without political parties which as the main medium for recruiting political elites, ensure that citizens are capable of articulating and integrating different interests, visions and opinions that represent the voice of broad sectors of society.

Party Manifestos and Political Campaigns in Nigeria: Reflections

Unlike interest groups, the agenda of political parties is to compete for control over state power and government so that they can direct a country's development process in the manner they deem fit, based on the ideological orientations and policy frameworks contained in their manifestos (Matlosa, 2005). Although the defining features of political parties are principally the capturing of government power and control of public policy-making, their impact on the political system is broader and more complex. In Nigeria, they are characterized by representation, elite group formation and recruitment, goal formulation, interest articulation and aggregation, socialization and mobilization and organization of government driven by ethno-religious affiliations, and so forth...factors readily describable by Dekker's (1991) indirect socialization as exerting significant influence on the subsequent acquisition of specific political knowledge.

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria's efforts to enthrone a sustainable political culture that ensures peaceful, progressive political development have been elusive. Her first Republic culminated in a bloody civil war (1966 – 1970). Her second Republic was greeted with political imbalances leading up to the incursion of the military again in 1983, and so on. Several explanations for this political quagmire have been put forward (Achebe, 1983; Okafor, 2017), however, inadequate empirical evidence on the influence of the interactions between the expectations of the electorates, the political party manifestos and campaign strategies, voter alignment, voting behavior and the actions of the elected officials appears to be lacking.

The quality of any democracy is determined by the vibrancy of its political parties. Political parties are in constant competition for influence and power as prerequisites for resolving society's political problems. One age-old mechanism through which political parties educate the electorate on the plans of governments to come and sway votes in their favour, is the party manifesto. The manifesto is the benchmark for evaluating pre-election appeal as well as post-election performance (Galadima, 2014). Aghara, Nwaizugbo, Chukwuemeka & Onyeizugbe, (2015) capture this as political marketing. This marketing captured in Point three (3) of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) manifesto reads that pursuant to its belief in the perpetual unity of Nigeria under the federal system of government, it shall continuously promote political tolerance, accommodation and compromise, religious harmony, as well as inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic accommodation and co-operation. Similarly, the All Progressives Congress (APC) manifesto upholds the belief in Nigeria's political success as achievable when cultures of impunity are abolished, the rights of her citizens are upheld and the rule of law is entrenched. This marketing expectedly facilitates voter alignment with the political party platforms and manifestos which best describe the expectations they have of the government.

Opeibi (2006) cited in Aghara, et al. (2015) argued that political advertising in the past two decades in Nigeria has assumed a new dimension with an increase in the use of negative political advertising during electioneering campaigns. He noted that prior to this period in Nigeria political candidates concentrated more on selling themselves and their programmes to the people with very few instances of negative advertisements. The resuscitation of democratic activities in 1998 leading to elections in 1999, meant that the electioneering campaigns took on a more competitive posture, affected by the 'winner-takes-all-syndrome' eventually characterizing that election and subsequently, the 2003 elections.

The 2015 general elections as the most recent case in point, was heralded by a deluge of hate speeches used by politicians against their opponents (individuals and groups). Many political candidates abandoned positive, issue-focused, image-building advertisements for direct vile attacks on their opponents. This fact was documented in a report by the Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Prof. Chidi

Odinkalu, Ukwueze and Uche (2015) reported concerns by political watchers, local and international observers and the citizenry about the barrage of hate speeches characterizing the political campaign messages and adverts of the two main political parties in the period leading up to the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria. These derogatory speeches and advertorials by the two main contending political parties deemed irreconcilable with the patriotic stances portrayed in the parties' manifestos had ethno-religious undertones. The worrisome trend led to increased entreaties for peace by both the local and international communities that culminated in the signing of a peace deal popularly referred to as the Abuja Peace Accord.

In the light of the foregoing, we contend for voter (re)education and (re)socialization aimed at the de-alignment of the electorate from political processes and exchanges that purport to involve them but in reality relegate them. These (re)socialization processes canvass alignment with values that allow them to identify with the right parties, strengthen mass-elite linkages, enable capacity and coalition-building, enhance decision making and give direction to mandates (Von Schoultz, 2017). These front-burner issues to be invested in by stakeholders within Nigeria's political landscape must ensure that the majority of the electorate develops tangible skills appreciative of socio-political issues and bereft of the partisan self-serving information disseminated by political parties if political development is to be achieved in Nigeria.

Political Value Acquisition, Voter Alignment and Voting Behaviour in Nigeria: A Theoretical Discourse

The United States Psychological Operations (PSYOPS, 1999) describe the planned operations for conveying selected information and indicators to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately, the behavior of governments, organizations, groups and individuals. The PSYOPS (1999) is in three forms: the Strategic (informational activities conducted outside of the military arena), the Operational (activities conducted across the range of military operations, including during peacetime) and the Tactical (activities conducted in the area assigned to a tactical commander across the range of military operations).

Certain components of the larger description of the psychological operations can be related to the current overarching influence of the style, quality and content of political education on political processes and political development in Nigeria. More closely related to the purpose of this paper is the Strategic PSYOPS as a result of the demilitarized tactics which it engages including the conveyance of selected information and the influence on the motives, objective reasoning and behavior of individuals. It is noteworthy that the procedure constitutes part of a planned process.

Dekker (1991) referred to processes that adopt such strategies for influencing or modifying political attitudes and behaviour as, 'intentional political socialization'. These psychoanalytic, demilitarized, intentional processes are agreeable with the postulations of the elite theory and the dominant-ideology and sociological models of voting behavior. They can be used to describe the mechanisms which the more powerful political elite groups have engaged over the years to effectively keep the electorate in Nigeria in a perpetual position of subservience and docility.

Several theories explain the power relations within the Nigerian society. C. Wright Mills' (1956) elite theory assessed the roles of the eponymous triumvirate 'power elite' who occupy the dominant positions in the dominant political, economic and military institutions and the influence of their decisions on the trajectory of political processes. Their actions and activities are seen as emasculative, leading to a decline in politics as an arena for debate and its relegation to a merely formal level of discourse. By positing that power in the state is independent of the state's democratic election process but rather rests in the hands of a small minority consisting of economic elite and policy-planning networks (Witten, 2015), it explains the control of the upper class elite over the strings of government. Further assertions are that power is concentrated in the hands of a few elites unified on the basis of wealth, nobility, race, gender, religion, etc. to the exclusion of the non-elite groups who are the diverse and powerless majority (Shannon, 2011).

The dominant-ideology model highlights the degree to which individual choices are shaped by a process of ideological manipulation and control. As the voters attitudes conform to the tenets of the dominant ideology, the parties rarely formulate policies in isolation of the ideology. Ironically, the electoral process tends to uphold this position including the distribution of power and resources within the society. The model resembles aspects of the sociological model which emphasize a person's position in a social hierarchy and social conditioning while downplaying individual calculation and personal autonomy. It highlights the role of political education by the government and the mass media as determinants of individual and group interpretation of their position. This is because the media are able to distort the flow of communication by structuring preferences and sympathies and influencing the agenda for debate (Heywood, 2003).

The sociological model ignores the role of individual and personal self-interest as determinants of socio-political affiliations but associates voting behavior with group membership in the sense that electors adopt voting patterns reflective of the social and economic positions of the groups to which they belong. The model highlights the importance of social affiliations along the lines of the various class, ethnic, religious, gender and regional divisions and tensions within the society in question. Von Schoultz (2017) quotes Lazarsfeld, Berelson &

Gaudet's (1948) position on social characteristics determining political preferences to the extent that the individual tends to 'think politically as he is socially'. Rationality and party allegiance are therefore based on group interest and party allegiance (Heywood, 2003).

Discussion

Lindberg and Morrison (2005) began their discourse on voter alignment by questioning the reasons behind voter alignment with political parties, the nature of these alignments and the conditions under which the alignments are activated in new African democracies. Von Schoultz (2017) in evaluating the social cleavage theory emphasizes 'the moving character of the target' such that the voter is affected by variations in country, time, environment and election contexts in either being realigned with established parties or being volatile. Ball's (1981) analysis of the role of social classification in the determination of voting patterns listed occupation, income and education as some criteria that have provided 'reliable' guides to voter preferences to the detriment of more tangible objective assessments. In Erdmann's (2007) study of elections in Zambia, ethnicity was one of the socio-cultural factors that explain long-term determinants of partisan alignment. This resonates in the Nigerian instance where politics is ideology-driven.

As witnessed in the run-up to the 2015 elections, the majority of the Northern Muslim voters were more drawn to identifying with the Northern Muslim presidential candidate of the APC (Muhammadu Buhari) than with the presidential candidate of the PDP (Goodluck Jonathan) who was the incumbent and hailed from the South-South. Galadima (2014) described political parties in Nigeria as largely inchoate and undeveloped and built around personalities and the politico-economic elite of the country rather than around political programs or platforms. He goes on to state that there is little or no regard for ideologies or platforms since the political parties hardly reflect an organized group of persons pursuing the same ideology, political ideas or platform of government. The fallout of this is that the political parties have no standpoints on national issues and lack clear policy streams where alternatives are considered and decisions made.

Expectedly, the confidence and trust of the public in the political parties is waning because of the non-existence of the parties as inclusive, participatory organizations with visionary policies and clear values in their manifestos (Galadima, 2014). The political landscape has been run by cabals that fit snugly into the self-serving groups, processes and activities described by the elite and power elite theories to the exclusion of the vast majority of her citizens. The mass media is also utilized by the elite groups for the achievement of their socio-political goals through the advancement of their ideological stances. The media socializes the electorate into the beliefs of the groups with which they identify to the extent that even the instructions of traditional rulers are potent in providing guidelines for voter choices and decisions (Fasakin, et al. (2017). This position results in a situation that can be described as a double-bind in which the electorate is the victim exposed to a repetitive activity, in this case a constantly unfavourable political exchange.

Bateson, Jackson, Haley and Weakland (1972) in Gibney (2006) enumerated the double-bind situations whereby individuals are embroiled in a communicational matrix, in which messages contradict each other, the contradiction is not able to be communicated on, yet the victim is unable to leave the field of interaction. Gibney (2006) in his discourse on the double-bind theory observed that it introduces the concept of 'power', albeit covertly, in the psychotherapeutic realm. The double-binds 'work' because someone has power over someone else or at the very least (and hardly 'least'), someone has the right to define the operant context for another person. In the case of Nigeria's political communication, the electorate is the victim while political parties are the communicators. Though the constitution prescribes freedom to vote and be voted for and party manifestos claim respect for human freedom and dignity, it is contradictory to learn that people do not freely participate in politics. The misnomer is that the electorate and the elitist elected officials are key players in a relationship whereby the political and socio-economic well-being of the former is at the behest of the latter.

The role of poverty and lack in deepening the divide between the rich and the poor and engendering the deprivation and social injustice that pervades the society cannot be understated. In reality, a vast majority of the Nigerian population lives below the poverty line (Opejobi, 2016). Access to the means of acquiring political knowledge and opportunities for participating in politics are determined by the social status of the individual (Dekker, 1991). This *status quo* is maintained by the fact that her most viable sectors have been hijacked by the 'select few' members of the upper class alongside the contradictory 'do-or-die' campaign strategies of the various political parties. Responsibility for the formulation of target-specific policies that should ordinarily steer the nation in the right direction rests with this group with most of the policy outcomes evidencing the relegation of the expectations of the electorate.

In the absence of tangible, authentic political information and the inability to reconcile campaign promises with government performances, the voters become apathetic towards meaningful political participation in the future. The over-concentration on the somewhat bloated, distractive and derogatory information disseminated concerning the personalities of political opponents disconnects the electorate from the political processes. This disconnect arises from the inability to reconcile the goals and cogent perspectives of the party manifestos with

the realities with which they are confronted in actuality. In the years of Nigeria's democracy, the campaign promises, policy strategies, and political behavior of the elected individuals continually run parallel to the electorate's expectations of political gains and benefits.

The elite groups and dominant ideologies thrive on the ignorance of the majority of the electorate. This ignorance is bred by the futility of the socio-economic status or social class they occupy and the effects of these in determining the extent of their access to the mechanisms and corridors of power. The electorate is systematically 'fed' select information through the well-crafted manifestos of political parties designed by these 'select few' in order to influence their motives and behavior. This process is systematically planned, comparable to the strategic PSYOPS utilized by the United States military. It is also resplendent of Dekker's (1991) intentional political socialization which is crucial to keeping the cabal in a perpetual position of dominance that empowers them to quell all forms of revolution against the subsisting state of affairs.

Rescuing the electorate from the political party: A political counseling proposal

The success of democracy in the West thrives on the stability of the party systems (Von Schoultz, 2017). This stability is achievable and the imminent onset of political activities to herald the 2019 general elections in Nigeria makes it all the more pertinent. This paper proposes strategies that emphasize political (re)socialization and (re)education, designed to midwife voter de-alignment and alignment by encouraging values to stabilize Nigeria's political landscape such as:

1. **The establishment of an independent political information and counseling agency** - It should either be established as an autonomous body or be created as the political counseling sub-unit of the National Orientation Agency (NOA) responsible for the continuous political education of the electorate beyond the rudiments to levels that adequately equip the citizenry to assess political processes and events before, during and after any general elections. The unit must constitute professionals of reputable character in the public service with specializations in the social sciences and law. Its Terms of Reference must encompass:
 - **The political counseling and re-sensitization of the electorate:** This is the mainstay and topmost recommendation of this paper. Its relevance thrives in redefining the influences on and trends of voter behavior and resolving the voter intimidation, election violence and other anomalies that have characterized election processes in Nigeria.

There should be a liaison with other voluntary counseling centres created around the country to boost the efficacy of this effort. The activities of the unit should spread to the churches, mosques, markets, tertiary and vocational institutions, political party secretariats, government offices and other places where the groups that can wreak mayhem during electoral periods are easily mobilized. The counseling processes should hinge on guiding the electorate in ways that maintain the focus on the assessment of the political issues and the achievability of promises in the manifestos of the contending political parties and not on issues that fuel disharmony and disunity and deepen the divide along ethno-religious lines.

- **Personality profiling of political candidates prior to elections:** This should center on the doctrines of transparency and accountability. Political candidates should be assessed on the bases of previous performances in their various capacities either in the formal or informal sectors of the economy. The concern may be that political office holders tend to portray behavior modified by the exigencies of the political offices and party affiliations that are distinct from the behavior observed during their pre-election forays in the arenas external to the political environment. Voters must therefore play the roles of 'appraisers of past events' adopting the tenets of the modified rational choice model of voting behaviour (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1988 in Erdmann, 2007) to judge retrospectively on the past performance of government (Erdmann, 2007).

Fundamentally, this psycho-social evaluation and profiling of individuals vying for political offices will preempt leadership behavior and ensure their alignment with the responsibilities of political office. Also, information gathered through the evaluation processes on the psycho-social stability, intellectual capacity and the eligibility or otherwise of candidates must be made available to the public. The social and moral assessment of candidates on the ballot by the electorate, will provide guidance to the electorate in respect of their expectations, influence voter decisions on de-alignment, alignment or realignment and elicit appropriate voter behavior thereby enhancing the quality of the political process.

2. **The entrenchment of the principle of political integrity:** This aspect of the political education will target adherence to the oaths of political offices; adherence to the promises/commitments in the party manifestos; obedience to the rule of law; obedience to constituted authority; and obedience to the constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria by duly elected officials. Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as a watchdog of the political processes must ensure that political parties voted into power are held accountable for the implementation of the programmes which were presented

to the electorate to gain their trust and votes (Galadima, 2014). This oversight function by the INEC will engender the confidence of the electorate in the commitment of the government to the protection of the political rights and trust of the electorate.

3. **The ingraining of a renewed spirit of patriotism:** A one-directional focus on qualitative and harmonious co-existence will midwife ‘unity and progress’ which are our national motto. Galadima (2014) proposed a more participatory and democratic procedure of party manifesto and programme development to checkmate the current practice where conspiratorial groups force their whims and caprices on the party and on the electorate.
4. **Encouraging peaceful co-existence:** This entails de-emphasizing relations, cleavages and affiliations prone to deepening ethno-religious divides, corruption, social exclusion, injustice, the escalation of tensions and the loss of hope in the Nigeria project. Accordingly, prioritizing the rights of every citizen particularly the right to life, freedom of movement and association and the right to live in any part of Nigeria, must top the agenda of strategies being developed to ingrain these core values in the fabric of the Nigerian society.

Conclusion

Over the years, electioneering campaigns and effective political education in Nigeria have been marred by the pall cast on political enlightenment, party affiliation and patriotism where information content and context are driven by ethno-religious divisions, threats of post-election violence, and so forth. Despite these anomalies, democracy in Nigeria must be maintained through the actions, activities and commitment of responsible citizens. The onus may also lie on the influence of technology and communication on twenty-first century political socialization, civic engagement, the creation of virtual organizations (Owen, 2008) and the development of new political identities (Bennett, 2008) consistent with the norms of citizen engagement (Owen, 2009) and a constantly evolving society, as mechanisms for voter de-alignment, alignment and realignment to right the inherent and perceived anomalies within her political landscape.

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