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Political Parties in Nigeria

Political parties are an important part of political process which performs so many tasks that it cannot be given a single definition. According to Shively, a political party is a group of officials or would-be officials who are linked with a sizable group of citizens into an organization; a chief object of this organisation is to ensure its officials attain or maintain power. Joseph LaPalombara also describes a political party as a formal organisation whose self-conscious, primary purpose is to place and maintain in public office person who will control alone or in coalition, the machinery of government. They are an important link between the people and the government. It was first developed in the nineteenth century.

Political parties have a great deal of features and functions which helps to further understand their meaning and the actions they perform. Its major feature is to seize the governments’ power through constitutional means that are peaceful and lawful. Another feature is the presence of principles of public policy embraced by the organisation, these principles are the party ideology. All political parties in aims and functions must take into consideration the interest of the nation i.e. it must be national-minded. They have manifestos that guide their behaviour during and after winning elections. They are also guided by their party constitution which govern the conduct of its officials and members within and outside government. Some of the functions performed by political parties are: political mobilisation and recruitment, political education and representation, interest aggregation, political stability, goal formation, organisation of government amongst others.

There are five types of political parties: the elitist parties, the mass parties, the ideological party, the broker party and the charismatic party. The elitist party also known as the cadre party is a political party that produces its membership from the highest rank of social hierarchy in a country. The mass party is one that produces its membership from all sections of the country and have wide membership. The ideological party is a political party created with political ideology that forms the bases of the party. The broker party is one that is formed with its members drawn from the upper and lower classes of the society. And lastly the charismatic party also known as the personality party is one formed by individuals with charisma.

Political parties were developed in Nigeria because of the growth in nationalist consciousness and sentiments as well as nationalist movements. They were also formed to organise against colonial misrule. The first political party to be formed in Nigeria was the Nigerian National Development Party(NNDP) in the year 1923. It was led by Herbert Macaulay (i.e. father of Nigerian nationalism) and was exclusively based in Lagos. The Nigerian Youth Movement was created in the year 1934 by a group of Nigerian youth led by Ernest Ikoli, Samuel Akinsaya and Dr. J.C. Vaughan. The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) was formed in 1944. It was the first political party to seek for the total independence of Nigeria. Its first president was Herbert Macaulay while its first general secretary was Nnamdi Azikiwe. It was later renamed the National Convention of Nigerian Citizen in the year 1960 when some parts of Cameroon broke away from Nigeria. Between 1950 and 1951, two main political parties were formed based on cultural associations. The Action Group (AG) with a main aim to provide leadership to and capture political power in the western region whose leader was Obafemi Awolowo and the Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC) whose main aim was combating ignorance, idleness, injustice in the northern region and control of the government in the north. During the pre-independence era of Nigeria, the political parties formed faced some challenges. They were without national outlook, they placed much emphasis on personalities rather than problems and their defection led to the collapse of political parties during this era.

In the second republic, when the ban of politics by the military was lifted 5 political parties were registered by the Federal Electoral Commission to participate in the 1979 general elections. They are: The National Party of Nigeria(NPN) which was officially launched in September 1978 in Lagos with its main aim being national unity. The Nigerian People’s Party (NPP) was developed from the NCNC, its main support base was the Igbo its main aim was to work towards full employment for all citizens and to promote economic, social and political equality of all sections of the country. The Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP) was led by Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim and its ethnic base was Kanuri. The Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) which was a subsidiary of the Action Group its main support base was Yorubaland and its main aims were free education at all levels, free health services for all citizens, full and gainful employment for all the able-bodied and integrated rural development. The Peoples Redemption Party (PRP). A sixth party was formed and registered to participate in the 1983 elections it was the Nigerian Advance Party (NAP).

In the third republic, two political parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention(NRC), were registered in accordance with the constitution, creating Nigeria’s first constitutional two party system. They were both established by the government and approved by the Armed Forces Ruling Council.

Lastly in the fourth republic, many political associations struggled to be registered as political parties by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) but only three were successful. The registered parties are the Alliance for Democracy (AD) who sponsored and contested elections throughout Nigeria during the 1998 and 1999 general elections. The All Peoples Party who won 9 gubernatorial elections in the middle-belt and north-west zones in the 1999 elections and later joined forces with AD to present a joint candidate during the 1999 presidential elections. The third party is the Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP) with its main aim being maintaining and preserving the integrity, unity and sovereignty of Nigeria. As of now there are over 90 registered political parties in Nigeria.