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CHAPTER 7

POLITICAL PARTIES IN NIGERIA

Introduction

Political parties are an essential features of politics in the modern age of mass participation. In liberal- democratic systems, they help to keep governments accountable to public opinions; even in autocratic system of government they help the government maintain its hold on power. In either case, political parties are an important link between government and the people (Dickerson and Flanagan, 2002). In the political process of a given political system, the party is an essential political agency.

The first modern electoral democracy was the United States of America, and it was here that the first parties developed. By the 1820's, there were well-organized parties, and the Democratic Party, which can trace its roots back to the time, is the oldest political party in the world. Political parties in Nigeria developed following the growth of nationalists' consciousness and sentiments and nationalists movements in the 1920's. This chapter aims at discussing the evolution of political parties in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification of the Idea of Political Party

There are as many definitions of political parties as the political thinkers. According to R.G. Gettel, "political party is a group of citizens more or less organized, who act as a political unit and who by the use of political power aim at controlling the government and carrying out its general policies". Herman Finer also defined political party as "an organized body with voluntary membership, its concerted energy being employed in the pursuit of Political Power". However, Joseph LaPalombra defined political party as "a formal organization 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". According to Agbaje (1999), "a political party is a group of persons bonded in policy and opinion in support of a general political cause, which essentially is the pursuit, capture and retention, for as long as democratically feasible, of government and its offices. Edmund Burke defines political party as a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interests upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed (Burke 1975). Dowse and Hughes see political parties as associations formally organized with the explicit and declared purpose of acquiring and maintaining legal control, either singly or in coalitions with other similar associations, over the personnel and the policy of the government of an actual or prospective state.

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 power of this organization is to ensure that its officials attain power or maintain power (Shively, 2008). Finally a party joins people together in a formally organized structure. From the above opinions we infer that a political party is a group of citizens, more or less organized, having some agreement in broad principles of national policy with an effort to capture political power by some constitutional means.

Characteristics of Political Parties

The following are some of the characteristics of political parties:

1. The major or central feature of political party is to capture government power through constitutional means

2. Political parties always have a broad principles of public policy adopted by its organization, which is referred to as party ideology.
3. Every political party must be national minded.
4. Political party should be an organized body, because it can only derive strength from an effective organizational structure.
5. Political parties has party manifestoes which guide their conduct during and after winning elections.
6. Political parties are guided by party constitution which direct the conduct of party officials and members within and outside the government.

Types of Political Parties

1. **Elitist/ Cadre Parties**
This is a political party that draws its membership from the highest echelon of social hierarchy in a country. E.g. doctors, lawyers, lecturers, etc.
2. **Mass Parties**
This is a political party that draws its membership from all sections of the society and have wide membership and their manifestos are aimed at alleviating the suffering of the masses. E.g. peoples party, labour party, workers party, etc.
3. **Ideology Party**
This is a political formed with political ideology or benefits which form the bases of the party.
4. **Broker Party.**
This is a political party with its members drawn from upper and lower classes of the society. Their basic aim is to reconcile the conflicting interest of the rich and the poor by carrying out policies of social justice for the interest of all.
5. **Charismatic or Personality Party**
This is a political party formed or led by individuals with charisma. Its revolves around the personal qualities of the leader.

Functions of Political Party

Political parties perform the functions listed below.

- i. Political mobilization and recruitment;
- ii. Political education;
- iii. Political representation;
- iv. Interest aggregation;
- v. Political stability;
- vi. Conflict management and political integration;
- vii. Organization of government;
- viii. Provision of alternative government and policies;
- ix. Electoral competition and governance;
- x. Goal formation;

Problems that Confronted Pre-Independence Political Parties

Political parties before independence in Nigeria were not without some challenges. Some of them are.

- i. The political parties were without national outlook. They had regional support and ethnic loyalty.
- ii. The political parties placed much emphasis on personalities rather than issues.
- iii. Intra- party and inter-party conflicts in most cases polarized the political parties and thereby splitting them into factions;
- iv. Political party defection weakened or led to the collapse of political parties during this era.

