

Political Entrepreneurs and Dividends of Democracy in Nigeria: Some Reflections

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the concept of political entrepreneurship, its features and impact on politics in Nigeria. It paints the picture of most Nigerian politicians striving for elective positions and political appointments only to become pawns on the political chessboards of political entrepreneurs; a game that has disenfranchised a good number of Nigerians and made unhappy many rational political office holders. Poverty and gullibility of those aspiring to political elective or appointed positions have been given as major reasons for the prevailing situation. The paper ends with some recommendations such as legislatively restricting the amount of money political parties and their individual contestants to positions can spend on electoral campaigns, ban of former Chief Executives of the three tiers of government from further contests and ban on internal and external financial sponsorship of political office aspirants as a way of sanitizing the political terrain but laments that except for political providence such suggestions would be a Herculean task, understandably as they would be opposed by the political powers that be.

Keywords: Political entrepreneurs, political kingmakers, political god-fatherism, unfair campaigns.

INTRODUCTION

Government exists firstly to protect the society from violence and injustice or oppressions of every other member of the society and secondly, to provide basic goods and services for the members. That implies that there is a social contract between the government as an institution and the citizenry. It therefore stands to reason that in the conduct of the affairs of government, the actors must primarily be interested in the protection of the society and the enthronement of justice. It is our point of departure in this paper therefore, to say that where, when and while a government as an institution or its actors or even those striving to be actors de-emphasise the issue of societal security, justice and franchise for the people, the aims of the nation is as well as discarded.

From the days of the British incursion into Nigeria the game of politics in Nigeria and the stake therein have significantly changed from the traditional pattern and has continued to change. Political entrepreneurs have taken over the officiating and determination of the rules of the game of politics in Nigeria. What appears to be politicking, electioneering campaigns and executive decision-making from most government houses therefore are decisions of political entrepreneurs operating behind the scene.

An entrepreneur is a person who habitually creates and innovates to build something of recognized value around perceived opportunities (Bolton and Thompson, 2000:5). A Political entrepreneur is therefore one who has the habit of taking advantage of other people's potentials by picking those with some potentials, investing their resources on them and show-casing them up for political competitions and /or appointments

The period from 2003 to date in Nigerian politics has witnessed series of clashes and expositions between political entrepreneurs and their lackeys. The Mba- Ngige episode in Anambra state, the Saraki-Lawal case in Kwara state, and the Oladoja-Adedibu case in Oyo state are few of the examples of ventures by political entrepreneurs that backfired and became political ridicules. In some other cases the actors quickly mended their fence to avoid public notice.

It is obvious that these mal-arrangements and political misadventures have negative effect on Nigerian polity. But the development concern of other nations has cause to be affected by the political affairs of Nigeria. Similarly, the development concern of Nigeria has direct relationship with that of other countries. This is the issue of what globalization pivots.

This paper is therefore focusing on how political entrepreneurship has taken over politics in Nigeria, what has aided their victory and what obstacle this system poses for the political and socio-economic development of Nigeria or what is popularly referred to as political dividends in this globalised economy.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS

The political entrepreneur has some distinct characteristics that make him stand out among others. Some of these are:

1. Perseverance and determination: He patiently scouts for people who possess the potentials he needs and when he has found one, he has the undying ambition and motivation engineered by expected gains to make the best use of the opportunity and the person
2. Ability and willingness to take calculated risks: At the initial period of engaging in this venture it would

look to others as extremely risky and waste of resources. But like their counterparts, the Business entrepreneurs, they have eyes for detecting inbuilt potentials in men and women and quickly identifying the right opportunities to invest in them.

3. Good orientation and clear goals: In this venture they have adequate knowledge of the level of politicking that would be worth investing in. They have concise goals of winning elections for their lackeys and political appointments for their favorites. They therefore have the capacity to finely match choice people with elective or/and appointed political positions.
4. Negative creativity: They are highly innovative and think very fast to do-in their opponents. Their political lackeys are but pawns in their political chessboards. They keep their political lackeys perpetually under their control. They have no word like honesty in their dictionary. They only calculate and focus on their potential social, political and economic gains and anyone that stands on their way in the pursuit of their goals risk all things imaginable. Because the other political competitors know the rules of the game and are themselves involved in similar investments, both parties are reckless, destructive and merciless while simultaneously presenting themselves to the public that they are supporters of the public good and are supporting only those who can bring succor to the poor. Normally, they would shake hands with their opponents in the open over a dinner or a glass of wine only to go behind the scene to instruct their thugs and hired assassins to “encourage the opponents to withdraw from the race”

THE POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

With the rise of nationalism sweeping across colonies and backed by British and European sympathizers it dawned on Nigerian traditional and educated elites that political independence was imminent from the late 50s. By 1960 when the independence was finally given it was obvious that some geographical areas particularly within the northern Nigeria were not ready for the independence. Much of their fear was that though they were more politically developed from their experience in the indirect rule system during colonialism, they were educationally relatively backward compared to their counterparts in southern Nigeria with whom they were to compete politically. The first business of political entrepreneurship began as the North had to scout for the few educated elites of Northern origin, groom them and field them for elective and appointed political positions at both the regional and federal levels of government. The traditional rulers, finding themselves unsuitable for elective political positions by virtue of their exalted royal positions handpicked some educated elites, invested in them and had them elected to various political positions to represent the interest of the North. A similar thing could not be said of the likes of Chief Awolowo, Chief Azikiwe or Chief Akintola.

Soon after independence the cry for political and economic power sharing led to arguments concerning the intensive and extensive development at the grassroots levels. In a country with numerous ethnic groups, cries of discrimination, marginalization and neglect became louder by the day. To ensure fairness and justice, ethnic groups gathered to support and sometimes financially contributed to make political campaigns easier for their chosen ones. The expectation was that these representatives would bring home the needed political and economic benefits that would otherwise have been denied them. It was understandable then that many of those sponsored politicians neglected their expected national roles after attaining such positions and concentrated on regional or ethno-religious bloc-making that has been the foundation of political retrogression in Nigeria today. From the oil boom days many businessmen, top bureaucrats and military top officers acquired wealth that could not be said to be totally legal. Some of these wealthy individuals, not possessing the requisite qualifications or adequate interest for political partisan elections or preferring to remain kingmakers have turned politics in Nigeria into party-sponsoring democracy. This redefinition of party politics to ‘money-bag-politics’ defined and regulated by the political entrepreneurs emphasized a particular brand of governance, one that prioritizes value for money, efficiency and effectiveness of financial returns to themselves rather than to the citizenry. Of course this shift which has turned the dividends of democracy away from the majority in favor of the ruling class symbolized and controlled by the political entrepreneurs is fast eroding the basis for the much needed socio-political development of the country.

John meadowcroft (2001:22) was of the opinion that it is a feature of all modern democracies that party representatives are disproportionately selected from certain sections of the population: the elites. Generally, he said, rational self-interested individuals will only participate in activities where the personal benefits outweigh the personal costs. Candidate being offered sponsorship for elective positions are therefore drawn into the contest by prospects of socio-political gains of an elective or appointed position while the political god-fathers (political entrepreneurs) have their focus on the behind-the-scene benefits accruable from political appointments and protégés, payments for inflated and non-executed contracts, decisions as to locations of social infrastructures and general satisfaction of tele-guiding government decisions from their homes.

Domestic and sometimes foreign private financial donations to political parties or to individual contestants to help off-set campaign expenses are largely unregulated. To worsen the situation, there are no

strictly observed laws regulating the level of spending of political parties or political contestant during campaigns. But it is obvious that a well-financed political party or individual contestants that are financially adequately empowered are more likely to win more electoral fortunes at the polls than their opponents of lower financial resources. This is partly because the former will succeed more in spreading their manifestoes to the voters and in better positions to influence the rules of the electoral process in their favor. Besides, in Nigeria where mass poverty is a prevalent feature of most rural and urban dwellers the voters tend to be more attentive to 'copies of manifestoes wrapped in naira notes'. This is the politically inviting situation that political entrepreneurs usually take advantage of. The end result is that elected and appointed office holders are made to sacrifice political accountability and financial transparency in favor of the usually negative dictates of these political entrepreneurs. But as Holte Ender (2010) would put it: 'why would someone spend \$150 million to get a job that pays about \$250 thousand? I guess the answer is power; they want power'.

FACTORS FAVOURING POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS

Like most less developed and capitalist- oriented economies there are only a numerically insignificant but financially powerful minority controlling the national economy . It is obvious that much of these accumulated wealth were from suspicious sources and sustained through not-so-legal means. But many responsible Nigerians do not have the funds to contest elections except they are backed by some rich and affluent people. Because many of those qualified for or interested in partisan politics do not have the financial wherewithal, they easily fall prey to political entrepreneurs masquerading as sympathetic supporters.

The level of political development in Nigeria is low. The masses are therefore hardly able to or interested in differentiating between party manifestoes. They understand more when their own 'sons-of-the-soil' are to be elected or telling them who to vote for. And this presents good opportunities for political entrepreneurs.

The masses, by virtue of their level of poverty, are willing to sell their votes now for some peanuts than be ready to vote on basis of future expectations of public good. The current pressing need to pay school fees for their children already driven away from school or to pay debt owed their neighbors is more demanding than all future promises of political gains. As stated above, many responsible Nigerians do not have the funds to contest election except they are sponsored by some rich and affluent people. The political entrepreneurs cash in such situation by giving voters cash gifts. And like the Shakespearean shylock, they bound the voters and those to be voted for by oaths so as to ensure their loyalty in voting and subservience after being sworn into power.

The gullibility of the aspiring politicians is another added advantage to the entrepreneurs. Eager to become elected governors, member of one legislative house or the other, the unsuspecting and uncalculating political aspirants play into the waiting hands of political entrepreneur who encourage them until they reach a stage when retreating becomes socially shameful and continuing, an economic suicide. The entrepreneur then, with all political and economic persuasiveness and ingenuity bounds the political aspirants to their political aprons by sponsoring their campaigns and backing them with all influence in exchange for conditionalities that make the political aspirant a little higher than a house boy of the entrepreneurs after victory.

Private founding of political campaigns is almost unregulated in Nigeria. It therefore becomes a game of who spends more to buy votes. To ensure an equal playing ground therefore political aspirants cannot but have political godfathers who would spit money for money on their behalf even when they do not initially fully understand the unexpected consequence of their trade-off.

THE UNANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES

With their ill gotten wealth, they buy thugs, equip them with sophisticated weapons and hard drugs and send them to cause havoc in the houses of political opponents and any one not sympathetic to their cause. They even pay government forces to kill, maim and rape opponents and their dependants. And of recent, kidnapping of supporters and relations of political opponents has been introduced into the political arena. But as we all know, political violence is self perpetuating and has the capacity to persist and worsen in its intended and unintended consequences. This for one has resulted in the alienation of and loss of potential good leaders as only the ruthless can survive the game.

Violence is not only that caused by political clashes. It includes violence caused to the people when they loose their jobs and means of livelihood for not belonging to the winning party. This induces the endless perpetuation of inequality around the people. (kaul 2009:299). It is contrary to expected dividends of democracy

It is obvious that every investment is expected to yield profits. The millions of private funds spent on electoral campaigns, vote purchases and physical sacrifice expended on the elections or appointment of political lackeys are expected to be scooped. The easy way out is for these political office holders to engage in various corrupt and illegal practices to satisfy their political godfathers: inflated contract prices, payments for contracts not executed, contract awards that do not follow due process and out-right looting of the treasury become the in-thing. In the celebrated Mba-Ngige episode in Anambra state, the state government cheques were reported to

have been signed in advance to the tune of millions of naira in favor of the governor's political father. Chief Adedibu of Ibadan was reported to have said the Oyo state governors are placed there by his efforts and so they had to share the security votes with him.

As part of dividends accruing to political entrepreneurs, appointments to sensitive and lucrative positions in the government or parastatals headed by their political lackeys are to be first approved by them. The reported Oyo state episode between ex-Governor Ladoja and Chief Adedibu illustrates the example of an insatiable political entrepreneur interested not only in the control of the state treasury but also in deciding who occupies what post in the government offices. The end result is that many top positions in our public and political offices are occupied by people with little or no capacities to run such offices except their excellence in subservience and sycophancy. The failures of most public organizations in meeting public expectation therefore need no further explanations. But it is perhaps adequate to say that our leaders have failed to understand that their behavior has not resulted in the planned dividends of democracy. Or more appropriately, it is apt to agree that it is difficult to get a man to understand something when his survival depends on his not understanding it. (kaul 2009)

As stated above, many of the votes are usually bought. The voters are therefore not in any advantageous position to make pressing demands on the political office holders for provision of social amenities promised during electioneering campaigns. Though the government policy prescribes provision of social services through grassroots participation therefore, this goal cannot be pursued because "the voters had eaten the sour grapes that had set their teeth on edge". It is therefore obvious that the three tiers of government in Nigeria are out of reach of the electorate and indifferent to public opinion. There is an over-exaggerated political belief that the 'elected' representatives adequately represent the opinions of their constituencies and would bring in constituency projects to improve the lives of the people. This has become very far from the truth and can therefore be said to be the antithesis of political development.

As the implicit political contract between the electorate and the government at the three tiers wanes to a fearful level of non-challenge and resignation, it therefore becomes harder for government to address issues such as social security, staff welfare, constituency demands, employment generation or even pensions for those who spent their youthful age working honestly for the nation. All these testify to the uncertainty of democratic dividends in this uncertain political terrain. Are these parts of challenges of development?

For clearer dividends of democracy, there must be an appreciable level of capacity to agree among policy makers. This capacity has however become so lacking in an increasing manner in the face of alarming and unpredictable harsh political terrain inundated with political prostitution of dumping political parties upon which politicians were elected into offices. There are still no clear guidelines on when politicians can change political parties. We are still guided by illegality shrouded in individual rights to associations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigerians cannot afford to watch their terrain traverse into the mafia-like game where some people are continuously disenfranchised by their economic status. The paper therefore makes the following recommendations:

1. Government funding of political parties on pre-agreed formula should be highly encouraged, because the funding of political parties is an important ingredient in their eventual survivability.
2. Such public funding advocated above should be closely monitored by a special committee that is composed of nationally acclaimed honest and non partisan members to avoid the situation where by political party members would share such financial windfall and abandon the cause for which the money was meant. Stern legislative provisions for the discipline of such offenders should be put in place and religiously implemented.
3. Private domestic and foreign financial donations to the political parties should be discouraged by law. Parties found guilty of accepting the donations should be banned from elections for specific period of time and such donations forfeited to the federal government.
4. There is need to ban politicians who have ruled before as political Chief executives at the federal, state and local government level either in the military or the civilian regimes from further contesting into positions of political Chief Executive at the state and federal levels. Only then can new blood and the not-too-wealthy but potentially honest and good politicians have opportunities to even think of contesting.
5. Similarly, every politician should be limited to a maximum of two tenures in any of the Legislative Houses. This would reduce the rate at which the politicians loot the government treasury for use in subsequent elections so as to bring themselves back to the government house even when it is clear that their regime brought more disaster than benefits to the people
6. The use of money to purchase votes from the electorate should be banned, and defaulters should be panelized. In fact, if private funding of parties were disallowed, the level of vote purchases would immediately and drastically reduce on its own due to general lack of wherewithal.

7. An electoral committee (or by whatever name it is called) that is indeed independent should be set up to monitor party and individual campaigns. Members of such bodies who should be transparent, honest and relatively above ethno-religious sentiments should differ from the party registration and election conducting body. This new body should be charged with the responsibility of detecting undue party or individual extra-campaign spending, unofficial donations to parties, vote purchase etc. which make party politics a dirty game in Nigeria. The committee should have the powers to sanction parties and individuals based on existing laws.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the concept of political entrepreneurship as it operates in Nigeria, drawing attention to the factors favoring its operation and its impact on Nigerian political system. Efforts have been made to recommend how the ugly monster can be excluded from Nigerian body polity

This writer is very much aware that those who would be willing to implement the recommendations are hardly in the right positions to do so. Put differently, because such political environment would disadvantage the political entrepreneurs and their lackeys the possibility of their allowing such environment to blossom is very remote. But who knows?

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