

Party Politics and Democratic Governance in Nigerian Local Government Administration: The Case of Rivers State (1999-2010)

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Abstract

The interface between party politics and democratic governance has not been thoroughly explored and problematized in the democracy debate in local government administration. Current debates have tended to focus more on symptoms such as poor service delivery, lack of accountability, corruption, non-involvement of the public in policy formulation and implementation, poor staffing, lack of autonomy, and by default, leaving out the lethal influence of party politics in the discourse. The article is, thus, an attempt to addressing the question of whether party politics catalyzes or hinders democratic governance in local government, using the theoretical tool of Marxist Theory of Democracy. The methodology adopted in the study is content analysis. It is hypothesized that party politics is an instrument that undermines democratic governance in local government administration. The study reveals, in the main, that the transactional nature of party politics is both antithetical and dysfunctional to democratic governance at the local government level. Within the drama of partisan politics, a regime of patronage politics that is diametrically opposed to all norms, values and tenets of democratic governance is instituted. The paper recommends the introduction of a zero or non-party system in order to eliminate, or at least, minimize the incidence of patronage party politics that has severely impaired democratic governance at the third tier government.

Key Words: Party politics, Democratic governance and Local government

1. Introduction

Party politics was made a permanent feature of Nigerian local government system with the introduction of participatory democracy and political responsibility in the 1976 Local Government Reforms (Nwankwo, 1995). The reforms were aimed, among other things, at democratizing of the local government structures and activities. In its 'Foreword' to the 'Guidelines for Local Government Reforms', the federal government did not mince words in showing that the main focus of the reforms was to transmit democracy to the local levels by providing for democratically elected local government councils which would not only have sufficient resources (human and material) but also be given adequate legal and constitutional latitude to develop the rural areas. By these provisions and delegation of responsibilities, the federal government hoped that 'these reforms would further enshrine the principle of participatory democracy and of political responsibility' in the third tier of government.

The reforms actually laid the foundation for the constitutional and legal basis of local government as a third tier of government. These main aspects of the 1976 Local Government Reforms were accorded constitutional guarantee in the 1979 Constitution as follows:

- i) Democratic character for the local government councils in Section 7 (1).
- ii) Statutory allocation of funds to the councils in Section 149 (2) (4) (5) (6) (7).
- iii) Functions of Local Government Councils in the Fourth Schedule.

These enhanced status of local government as a tier of government provided what Nwankwo (1995,153) refers to as 'the required and desired impetus for intensive party politics at the local level'. Nwankwo also observed that the ideas of

‘participatory democracy’ and ‘political responsibility’, promoted by the 1976 Local Government Reforms, can only be achieved within the realm of party politics. He argued that:

The control of the local government apparatus was now seen as very crucial for electoral success of a political party because it provides the necessary grassroots base for effective control of the state and federal government machineries. It is also important to mention that the introduction of participatory democracy and political responsibility at the local government level by the 1976 reforms implies the development of parties, factions or group.

Although party politics in local government administration gained formal and constitutional recognition in the 1976 Local Government Reforms, the practice is traceable to three key factors. The first is the introduction of the Richard’s Constitution of 1946 that provided for a ‘graduated system of indirect election based firmly and squarely on the Native Authority System’ then in force in Nigeria. Secondly, the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 had emphasized that any party which desired to win election at the regional level must develop a base at the local government level. The third factor is that the electoral laws in the Local Government Reform of 1955 in Western and Eastern regions gave *de jure* recognition to the growing importance of party politics at the local government level. A combination of these factors made local government units become the ‘corner-stone of political party organization in Nigeria’ (Nwankwo, 1995).

The emphasis on party politics at the local government level reached a ‘commanding height’ in the 1979, 1983, 1991, 2003, 2007 and 2011 governorship elections. The various Electoral Laws/Acts guiding these elections provide that for a political party to control a state or produce its governor, it must win 25% of the valid votes cast in at least two thirds of the local government areas of the state. Obasi (1998:185) writes that the enhanced political status for local government made it a recognized base for state and national political activities. Nwankwo (1995), on his part, actually admitted that from the Second Republic, local government became the ‘centre for party politics’.

Given that the pattern of party politics practised since the introduction of Elective Principle via the Clifford Constitution in 1922 has been a critical concern to scholars and observers of Nigeria’s political system, this paper examines issues in party politics that contribute to and constrain democratic governance in local government administration. The study is guided by the hypothesis that party politics is an instrument that undermines democratic governance in local government.

2. Clarification of Concepts

It is important to define the following concepts, namely, party politics, democratic governance and local government, because they form an integral part of the study. For example, the character of party politics will either contribute to or constrain democratic governance, which will ultimately enhance or impede local government administration.

2.1 Party Politics

In a liberal democracy, a political party is an association of people with similar interest(s) and common purpose. The interest(s) and purpose shown by them revolve around the objective of using the party to acquire power, share in the exercise of power or to take control of government (Yaqub, 1992). Similarly political parties are organized instrumentalities through which the citizens not only attempt to influence, but also control and determine the type and direction of public policies and programmes, including the general allocation of resources (Pakis & Inokoba, 2006). By liberal democratic standards, it shows that political parties are ‘voluntary organizations to which people voluntarily belong’ and they develop their rules and guidelines based on their philosophies. It is on this basis that Yaqub (1992:55) posits that:

Political parties are thus conceptualized not because they have been imposed or decreed into existence by a super-ordinary body of men for the use of lesser men and women,

but because they emerge organically from the common history, shared values, interest and aspirations of those who are current as well as prospective members.

The essence of party politics, in the conceptualization of Yaqub, is to acquire power and to implement party politics.

Yaqub's idea of party politics was more rigorously interpreted by Okonta (2008) in the submissions that political parties not only aggregate views and interests, they are also the organizational machine for articulating issues and ideas relevant to the development of a nation. Anything short of this, is considered by Yaqub, as a partial conceptualization of what a political party is expected to be and a subversion of the normal process of the development of political parties, especially in the liberal democratic mould. Yaqub (1992:15) states thus, 'fighting election is crucial but educating, mobilizing and aggregating the demands of the electorates are equally, if not more, important functions of a political party'.

Komolafe (2010:72) agrees with Yaqub and Okonta that political parties do not exist just for the purpose of elections. He enumerates other functions of a political party to include education, policy formulation, advocacy, research, mobilization and contestation of ideas. According to Komolafe, in most nations, political parties exist to popularize ideas and organize issue-based campaigns, engage government in the debate of policies, promote divergent ideologies and raise issues that merit structured national debate. To provide a counterpoise to the party in power, Komolafe said opposition parties 'form alliances and develop working relationships based on proximity of ideas'.

From the foregoing discourse, political parties provide the platform through which party politics is given practical expression. This probably explains why Olaniyi (2001:99) defines party politics as 'activities of political parties in a democratic environment to seek for the control of political offices through stated norms of elections'. It exists when elective principles are present in a democratic state which recognizes and institutionalizes the legitimate choice of the citizens to elect their representatives into political offices (Azeez, 2009). Hence, the primary objective of party politics is directed towards a single goal of accessing and controlling governmental or political power. In the submission of Okoye (1982), party politics includes 'activities of formal structure, institution or organization which compete through electoral process to control the personnel and policies of government, with the aim of allocating the scarce resources in a state through an institutionalized means or procedure'.

There are arguments that the character of party politics in Nigeria is such that the political party in power at the centre stifles opposition parties. In the long-drawn controversy, Ayila (2006) argued that party politics in Nigeria's democratic practice since 1960 shows that any political party in control of the apparatus of state, principally gained and sustained by control of the economy, plants moles and disruptive elements in opposition parties to create instability and render them ineffective to compete for power. The reaction of Ogunmefun (2007:18) to these arguments is that, it is the responsibility of opposition parties to develop their parties and make them viable to compete for power. He further observes that 'the opposition parties are weak, ineffective and poorly organized to challenge for political power'. Ogunmefun summarizes political parties in Nigeria as:

A collection of associations or interest groups. As things stand, there is complete mismatch between the quality of party membership and policy evolution. The quality of people who constitute the large majority of the membership of political parties have little or no education and many are unfit to articulate policies for effective governance.

This characterization of political parties is at variance with what obtains in advance and growing democracies where people join and identify with political parties on the basis of their political beliefs and what policies they stand for in public service.

Writing on the crisis of party politics in Nigeria, the Political Bureau (1987:128) in Jaja & Erundu (2000:64) emphasizes thus;

Party politics is poisonous. It is the politics of war not peace, of acrimony and hatred, mud-slinging, not of love and brotherhood, of anarchy and discord, not of orderliness

and concord, it is politics of cleavages, divisions and disunity and not of co-operation, consensus and unity; it is the politics of hypocrisy and patriotism, it is the politics of rascality, not maturity, of blackmail and near gangsterism, not of constructive honest contribution.

Without doubt, one of the tragic features of contemporary politics and conduct of political office holders in Nigeria has been the crisis of party politics extensively captured by the Political Bureau. The basic truth about party politics in Nigeria is that, it has remained a means of economic survival. As Abdulrazaque (2008:8) affirmed, party politics in Nigeria has degenerated to a 'tea-party' and are organized in a manner that reflect the 'pro-rich, monetized, individualistic and self-centred politics of the Nigerian capitalist elite'. In the same vein, Adedeji (2000) in Ogunmade (2008:21) writes that 'political parties have been turned into panoply of institutions of no consequence'. On his part, Komolafe (2008:88) thinks that the decline of party politics is the 'tragedy of contemporary Nigerian politics'. This, in Komolafe's view, is so because weak political parties is a metaphor for weak institutions of liberal democracy. In his words, 'the organizations called political parties determine the capacity of states to establish and maintain legitimate, transparent and accountable political institutions'.

From the above remarks, it is obvious that political parties in Nigeria lack character, ideology, conviction and direction, while party politics is characterized by poverty of ideas, lack of ethical content and devoid of democratic ethos. It also logically follows that party politics in Nigeria is at variance with the fundamental purpose of political parties which, among other things, are indispensable structures of democratic governance.

2.2 Democratic Governance

According to *1989 World Bank Report on Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, governance is defined 'as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development'. Democratic governance, by extension, refers to a democratic mode of exercising powers and performing functions by established institutions to achieve developmental goals (Lafenwa, 2009). More appropriately, democratic governance can be understood in terms of the elements it constitutes. It is in line with the constitutive elements of democratic governance that the National League of Cities (2008) in Lafenwa (2009:4) defines the concept as 'the art of governing a community in participatory, deliberative, and collaborative ways'.

Jega (2006) correctly listed the constitutive elements of democratic governance to include the following:

- i) Representation: People having the freedom to choose their representative through periodic free and fair election.
- ii) Participation: People being involved in the processes of policy formulation and policy implementation, and in the general management of public affairs.
- iii) Responsive and Accountable Governance: Delivery of service to the people and communities in a manner that creates utilitarian value i.e. policies of government bringing greatest happiness to the greater number of people.
- iv) Egalitarian Society: Equality before the law, rule of rule, constitutional regime, fairness, economic and social justice.
- v) Transparency and Accountability in both public conduct and in the management of commonwealth (public resources).

The attainment or elusiveness of these elements in a political system is, simply, a measure of its democratic stature.

In revisiting basic questions concerning the values and nature of democratic governance, the concept is approached by emphasizing two of the main pillars of the liberal democratic tradition; citizen participation in the determination of government itself and in decision making processes; and a rights 'platform' that supports and protects the role of individuals in the governance process. This explains, to a large extent, why democratic governance is defined by Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights (ODIHR) as a 'system of government where institutions function according to democratic processes and norms, both internally and in their interaction with other institutions' (www.osce/odihhr/demgov). According to these organizations,

key principles of democratic governance are political pluralism, institutional accountability and responsiveness, active civil society, human rights, the rule of law and democratic elections.

Broadly speaking, democratic governance, in the expressions of Roberts and Edwards in Bello-Imam and Obadan (2004:3) depicts:

Popular participation, absolute respect for the rule of law, a general guarantee of fundamental freedoms which lubricate popular participation, periodic, competitive, free and fair elections with the vote of every citizen counting equally, respect for majority rule as well as the readiness of minority to acquiesce in the decision of the majority, accountability, guarantee of separation of powers in practice, transparency, and responsiveness in governance and opportunity for change of government or any leadership found wanting.

Ideally, democratic governance operates with democratic institutions like political parties, the judiciary and the legislature, which are adduced by classical democratic theory as bulwarks of democracy.

The dominant role of political parties in democratic governance is much stressed by Agorundu (2009) and Achi (2005). Agorundu not only described political parties as 'central organs in any democratic setting', but also alluded to the fact that strong and viable parties is a 'prerequisite to an enduring democratic culture'. He further noted that party politics based on principles of equity, representation, diversity and choice is important for the democratic governance. Similarly, the critical links between political parties and sustenance of democratic governance reinforces what Achi (2005:109) refers to as 'non-negotiable imperative of strong political parties as a bulwark for the survival of democracy'.

2.3 Local Government

A number of attempts have been made by many writers and institutions to conceptualize local government. The International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) in Bello-Imam and Uga (2004:454) defined local government as;

That level of government with constitutionally defined rights and duties to regulate and manage public affairs which are constitutionally defined for the exclusive interest of the local population. These rights and duties shall be exercised by individuals that are freely elected or appointed with the full participation of the elected body.

On her part, the Federal Republic of Nigeria in the 'Guidelines for Local Government Reforms of 1976' defined local government as:

Government at local level exercised through councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the councils substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal government in their areas, and to ensure, through devolution of functions to these councils and through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiatives and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.

The United Nations Office of Public Administration in Ozor (2003:19) has also defined local government as:

A political sub-division of a nation or (in a federal system) state which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or to exact labour for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected.

The implications of the definitions, as offered by these institutions are that;

- i) Local government is a political authority. In other words, it is a level of government vested with executive and legislative powers to make and execute laws and policies.
- ii) It is created by law or constitution, which defines its structure, functions and powers.
- iii) It is the government which is nearest to the people.
- iv) It is a government by which the local people manage their affairs.

The concept of local government as presented by Chukwuemeka & Uche (2005:317) captures that salient features enumerated above. They defined local government as, 'a political sub-division of a state, which has a legal existence under the law and is run by elected representatives of the local people, with substantial autonomy in administrative and financial affairs'. Okoli (2000) in Nyewusira (2007) stated that it is impossible to talk of local government without making reference to national (federal or state) government since the idea of 'local' presupposes the existence of a broader government superintending the 'local' one. In the light of this observation, Okoli pointed out three crucial issues concerning local government. One is that local government exists to fill a gap which the national government is too remote to fill. Secondly, local government implements the ideals, objectives, programmes and aspirations of the national government at the local level. Thirdly, the ideology of the national government determines to a large extent the structure and functioning of the local government.

Generally, local government has been defined as the breaking down of a country or state into small units or localities for the ultimate goals of convenient administration in which the inhabitants of the area play direct and full part by the instrumentality of their elected or appointed representatives/officials who exercise power or act in their behalf based on the powers conferred upon it by the central government (Ina, 2002:137). In this system, legislative, executive and administrative responsibilities are locally and directly executed by those in authority, whether elected or appointed, who have absolute control over the local bureaucrats and finance. In this vein, Stanyer (1976) in Nweke (2008:8) observes that the elements of a local authority are people, some of whom are either elected or appointed. Ina (2002) has also opined that local government has defined territory with relative autonomy. These definitions view the local government as a unit of administration with defined powers and authority imbued with relative autonomy while its decision-making organs could be elected or appointed.

Contributing to the subject of local government administration in Nigeria, especially as it affects its statutory functions, Nwankwo (2004:65) observed that the third tier level of government was specifically established to assist the two higher tiers of government, the federal and state, with a view to achieving effective grassroots development. He, however, noted that the evaluation of the performance of local government carried out by the Technical Committee in the review of the structure and administration of local government, from 1999 to 2008, revealed that there is a failure of governance at the third tier level of government in Nigeria.

Implicit in the foregoing conceptualization of local government administration is that it is a form of arrangement for administering public service at the grassroots level. As a matter of fact, Oloyede (2006:12) posits that local governments exist as a 'first port of call in terms of governance, delivering dividends of democracy and in terms of democratic culture'.

3. Theoretical Perspective

The Marxist theory of Democracy, as adapted in Obasi (2001) has been adopted in this study. Karl Marx's critique of the capitalist system and its corresponding liberal democratic practice, constitutes the foundation or basis of what is referred to as 'Marxist theory of democracy'. The contention of the Marxist theory of democracy is that the state is, essentially, a class phenomenon or an instrument used to advance the interest of the economically dominant class. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848)*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engel stated emphatically that 'the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. Thus, those who are economically dominant use their economic power and resources to secure control of the state through election and other democratic processes, and thus acquire a vantage position to make laws, enunciate policies and take decisions that will advance, protect and perpetuate their own class interest. In most cases, the preservation of class interest of those who access political power is achieved by undermining and suppressing the interest of the working class (Ntete-Nna, 2004).

The relationship between economic and political power, painted in Marxist theory of democracy, is best demonstrated in the United State of America, the world's foremost liberal democratic country. Writing on the class background of American political leaders, Sherman et al (1982) in Ntete-Nna (2004:177) alluded to the fact that most American congressmen are 'white, male and affluent' and that 'upper-income members of the capitalist class hold a disproportionate percentage of the top political positions'. For instance, the writings of Hunta and Sherman (1978) in Ntete-Nna (2004:178) reveal that;

From 1789-1932, the fathers of US Presidents and Vice Presidents were 38 per cent farm owners and only four percent wage earners or salaried workers. Similarly, from 1947-1951, the fathers of US senators 22 per cent professional and 33 per cent proprietors and officials, four per cent wage earners, while from 1941 to 1945, the fathers of all US Representatives were 31 per cent professionals, 31 per cent proprietors and officials, 29 per cent from owners and only nine per cent wage or salaried workers.

The common thread in Marxist theory of democracy is the assumption that liberal democracy as practised in capitalist state is a sham. There is the belief that democracy in capitalist states is minority rather than majority rule (Obasi, 2001). This is because the bourgeois class that use their economic power to access political power constitute a small percentage of the entire population. For instance, in his characterization of liberal democracy, Lenin (1949) contends that the majority of the population is excluded from participation in political activities. Hence, he says that democracy in a capitalist society is 'democracy for an insignificant minority or simply democracy for the rich'. Obasi (1988:34) underscores the fact that genuine democracy is not realizable in capitalist society since 'the guarantee of political equality by a bourgeois democratic paradigm is meaningless in an environment characterized by widespread economic and social inequality'. Simply put, the capitalist state cannot be democratic by its nature, as it represents the dictatorship of the minority called the bourgeoisie.

Marxist theory of democracy generally views liberal democracy as an unrealistic utopia. This is because it is believed that in a capitalist state, institutions of democracy such as the media and political parties are largely controlled by capitalists and one either needs large economic (financial) resources or to be supported by the bourgeoisie to win election or access political power (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/democracy_in_marxism). Therefore, a close observation into the machinery of capitalist democracy reveals that political parties and party politics are actual obstacles, restrictions or encumbrances on democratic governance since those who superintend the affairs of political parties tend to exclude and squeeze out majority of the citizens from politics and active participation in democracy. As a matter of fact, the exclusion of the poor from 'authoritative allocation of values' is exacerbated by the highly monetized nature of party politics in Nigeria. It is within the context of the foregoing that this study applies the Marxist theory of democracy to argue that party politics constrains and undermines democratic governance in local government in Rivers State.

4. Party Politics and Democratic Governance in Local Government in Rivers State: Thematic Analysis

The results of the elections that heralded the Fourth Republic made the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) the most dominant political party in Rivers State. As generally observed at various levels where the party formed government, local government administration in Rivers State suffered from what Amuta (2009:72) described as 'massive invasion of the Peoples Democratic Party'. Okonta (2008) also alluded to this 'invasion' when he wrote that the PDP, following its victory in the general elections of 1999, was transformed 'into the instrumentality of the will of a chosen few who barked out orders and expected them to be obeyed without question'. Okonta further noted that 'this parade ground mentality' permeated the rank and file of the party and also 'spread out to infect the states and local government areas'. This explains why there were no policy documents or programmes with which the PDP governed the local government councils. As a consequence of the parlous conditions of the ruling party, it failed to provide reasonable 'guardianship role' to the leadership of the local government council elected under its platform. Instead, Okonta observed that 'garrison commands' were regularly issued to local government councils by the party apparatchik.

One cardinal function of a political party is to make policies in accordance with its manifesto while the political underpinnings of local government is that it offers the local people a wide scope of participation not only in taking decisions on issues that mostly affect them, but also in the political process. In other words, local government provides more opportunity for the people to be represented and consulted in issues affecting them. Our findings show that the influence of party politics, rather than enhance this political function of local government, actually undermines it. This stems mainly from what Ileghmuh (2007:35) refers to as the 'exclusivist and isolationist character of the PDP'. Local government officials elected under the platform of the party adopted policies that are averse to participatory governance. The PDP, showed a tendency to approximate party interests to communal interests. In most cases, consultation on issues of general policy, budget proposals, and draft legislations are made on the platforms of PDP fora, without the involvement of a broad section of the populace who are either members of other political parties or non-partisan. This pattern of consultation severely restricted popular participation in governance at the local level as 'ruling party chieftains became more assertive'. The dominant role of the ruling party leadership in policy process is undoubtedly encouraged by what Ileghmuh (2007:36) describes as the 'tyranny of major actors within the PDP'.

A direct consequence of the 'exclusivist and isolationist character of the PDP' in the area of formulation and execution of policies is the entrenching of 'top-down' approach to development in local government administration. It suggests a more hierarchical and somewhat authoritarian style in which most decisions are made in a fashion quite unacceptable to the people directly affected. It defeats the notion that local government exists to provide local people the opportunity to learn how to participate in public affairs, especially where they are directly affected by whatsoever decisions are made or implemented. Ekeh (2008) writes that the subordination of the PDP to the whims and caprices of 'a few garrison commanders', the indifferent quality of party personnel and poor organization of the party adversely affected the quality of policies formulated and executed in the various local government councils. These factors, no doubt, resulted in poor service delivery in most local government areas in Rivers State. As a matter of that, the shifting of the locus of decision-making to agents of the ruling party in the local government areas was observed by Ekeh (2008) as the major factor to the failure of governance in the third tier level of government. One reason for this failure is the inability of local party officials, most of whom have limited formal education, to understand the complex workings of governmental institutions and to implement decision of a technical nature.

Apart from helping to advance opportunity for mass participation in government, Ibodje (2000) opines that the full impacts of the democratic process are directly brought to bear through the local government system. In fact, there is a universal belief that local government helps to bring democracy to the citizens at the lowest stratum of a nation. In other words, the institution of local government brings about a meaningful realization of the objectives of democracy in an effective manner that empowers the local people to recognize their full citizenship rights. Some authors in the field of local government have even posited that local government is synonymous with democracy by defining it as 'the government of the local people, by the local people and for the local people'. In practice, party politics actually distorted and eroded democratic values in local government councils. The submission of Baadom (2004:16) is instructive here:

Threats to democracy in the local government system have not come from members of the armed forces who have nothing but contempt for democracy, but rather from professional politicians and groups in the various political parties, who engage in criminal manipulation of the electoral process in order to win elections of the local levels, take power and then manipulate the mechanism of democracy to destroy democracy at the grassroots.

Since the return to civil rule in 1999, the PDP has shown to be a potent force in entrenching what Kolawole refers to as 'corruption of democracy and democratization of corruption' at the local government level. The conduct and outcome of the local government elections of April 2004 and April 2008 in Rivers State showed clearly that the PDP maximally mobilized state apparatus to win and control the administration of the twenty-three (23) local government councils. Tolofri (2007) specifically noted that what was foisted on the electorate in Rivers State in these elections is 'a version of liberal democracy that is essentially constituted as warfare as the inalienable rights of the citizens to participate in the electoral process was recklessly invaded, violated and spurned by the PDP'. Party politics, as practised by the PDP,

negated a distinguishing feature of democracy which is popular participation. As Ekwowusi (2001) argued, the essence of democracy is to open wide opportunities for every citizen who has the vocation to politics to come on board and participate in the political process. Regrettably, the electoral process in both the April 2004 and April 2008 local government elections in Rivers State threw up 'winners' that majority of the local people had no hand in electing. Consequently, these rigged electoral processes effectively meant that people at the grassroots were deprived of their rights to put in place a government of their choice in the local government councils. In essence, party politics violated the norms, culture and institution of democracy in Rivers State. To that extent, party politics rather than make local government councils 'bastions of democracy' turned them into 'citadels of political brigandage'. As Tolofari (2007) inferred, 'the press, civil society organizations and the electorates are witnesses to the sham and charade that severely maimed democracy at the grassroots'.

Scholars such as Ibodje (2000) and Ozor (2003) have argued that local government promotes development process through prudent management of financial resources. But the predominant pattern of party politics, from our study, shows that the various factions which made up the ruling PDP competed with each other to use financial resources, mainly from federal allocations and internally generated revenue, accruing to the local governments to distribute 'spoils' to their supporters. The monopolization of patronage for PDP members constituted a major asset for the party in building and maintain support-base during general elections. In fact, Agalango (2007:40) remarked that the PDP 'looked very much like a patronage party in Rivers State'. The link between PDP activities and the pursuit of patronage clearly reflected as the party acted, from time to time, as agency for recruiting contractors and labour required for road, health centre, market, school and other constructions undertaken by the local government councils. In fact, there were situations where some few individuals, under the platform of the People Democratic Party (PDP), employed force and money to take over political offices and run the local governments as if they are personal enterprises (Agalango, 2007).

It is further revealed that the cost of operating the local government system on the basis of party politics is rather too high in relation to the size and capacity of resources available to the councils. Clearly, the cumulative cost of maintaining the various organs of the party in power has become a huge drain on local government finances. Olori (2005:34) admits that 'there is monumental quantum of financial resources that passes through or directly accrues to the machinery of the political party in power'. For instance, Olori notes that 'the retinue of party officials that accompany local government chairmen on sundry local and international trips befit only medieval monarchs'. He went further to affirm that the entire regime of political patronage in the form of appointments, contracts, donation and monetary rewards to party loyalists 'has graduated into an industry'. These views present party machineries and structures as predatory to the development of local government. The predatory impact of party politics on local government administration is underlined in the comments of Okiri (2009:42). In his words;

The ruling party and their rent-collecting cabals have treated the institution of local government as a patronage tier of government used to reward loyalty to party. That is why in a multi-party system of over forty political parties, only the PDP won all the available positions in both the April 2004 and April 2008 local government elections in Rivers State. It was just a one horse race. The PDP simply emasculated other political parties and made itself the sole party in the contests to political offices in the local government councils.

The implication of the above submission is that the local government system which is designed to be centrifugal points of socio-economic development and welfare propagation for the citizens in the localities has morphed into diversion of public resources for sustenance of party structures in order to maintain hold on power. In this circumstance, party politics has not only become a conduit pipe for draining resources to the local government, but resources needed to meet development challenges in the rural areas are diverted to finance party politics. This is the major reason why it is difficult to relate the level of human and infrastructural development in the local government areas with the billions of naira received annually from Federation Account since 1999.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The sustenance of local government administration on the basis of party politics is responsible for attenuated democratic culture and the perennial underdevelopment of local government areas in Rivers State. This failure of democratic governance is explained, in the main, by the fact that the dominant party imposes politics of transaction rather than politics of transformation in the conduct of public affairs at the local government level. Under this regime of patronage politics, the capacity of local government to perform its traditional and constitutional functions such as promoting opportunities for popular participation and delivery of social services is severely impaired. The problem with party politics in Nigeria's democratic experience is that it eclipses completely the essence of local government system. There is so much evidence in the conduct of public affairs at the local level to suggest that the local government under party politics is, in practice, an extension of the party in power.

On the basis of our findings, we recommend the introduction of a zero or non-party system as the basis of recruiting political office holders in the local governments. The system will reduce transactional cost of participation in political leadership for poor and powerless local people who have the character and credibility to provide good governance at the local government level. Non-party system will also minimize the incident of patronage in party politics and therefore free resources for development programmes. And because there will be no far-reaching party hierarchy to influence and determine access to political power, it is easier for local people to make real choices about who should represent them in the executive and legislative councils of the local government.

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