

Electoral System, Institutional Designs and Political Party Institutionalisation in Nigeria

By

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I. Introduction

Political institutions can easily be judged as good or bad on the extent and degree to which they provide political satisfactions or utility to citizens. Political utility can therefore be “estimated for the inclusiveness of citizens in the participation processes and the fit between policy-making decisions and citizens’ preferences” (Colomer, 2008:1). It can be discerned that the nature and character of institutional designs are likely to influence political party institutionalisation. In a recent study, Kura (2008) establishes that institutional designs have contributed in weakening and destabilising political party oppositions in Nigeria. The ruling party has unlimited access to state resources that it uses in not only strengthening itself but also wooing opposition politicians through clientelistic networks. The nature of the presidential system gives abundant power to the president to appoint all strategic officers, such as all members of electoral institutions, top ranking police and army commanders, etc. Thus, in a state characterised by clientelism and neopatrimonialism, these officers have become instruments of the ruling party(s). They are used to destabilise opposition parties and instruments of electoral malpractice (Kura, 2008). The implication of this conclusion is that there was a tendency for fragmented party system institutionalisation Nigeria. This conclusion was rather drawn from the basis of a PhD research conducted between 2004 and 2008, and on the basis of a pioneering theoretical framework for studying party institutionalisation developed by Randall and Svàsand (2002).

However, beyond these general conclusions, an important element that perhaps could easily influence party institutionalisation, and which previous researches on political parties have not adequately captured is *the question of the relationship between electoral system and institutional designs on one hand and party institutionalisation*

on the other. In other words, this study is about rethinking the conceptual instruments scholars employ in interpreting and explaining changes in institutional designs and electoral system and their implications on party and party system institutionalisation. This is necessary because electoral system and institutional designs are a *sine qua non* to party institutionalisation and party system stability. The general argument among party scholars is that the development of a stable, coherent representative political parties which can silhouette and channel popular preferences properly is indispensable to successful democratisation (Birch, 2001).

Moreover, institutional designs can affect choice and preference of major political actors and consequently shape the levels of electoral instability. It is evident that the relationship between the two factors is complex. Indeed, Cox (1997) notes how factors influencing party and party system shape electoral system and/or how given electoral system of a particular polity can cause party and party system to take its shape. Of course, it means there is a symbiotic relationship between the two. It is important to note that:

[...] if a given configuration of parties brings about a change in the electoral system, it is precisely because those parties anticipate the effects which electoral [and other] institutions will have on the future developments in the electoral system designs. There is therefore no question that electoral systems do have effects ... [on party and party system institutionalisation] (Birch, 2001:6).

The broader argument is that the effects of electoral system and institutional designs on party institutionalisation are issues of degree and extensiveness and that the relationship would be largely reciprocal (Moser, 2001). Furthermore, any analytical analysis of electoral systems and institutional designs would reveal how they provide strategic incentives for political elites and voters and define the electoral options under different circumstances. For example, voters would often want positively utilise their votes by opting for parties and/or coalitions, which have higher probability or chance of winning elections. Similarly, electoral candidates join parties that stand the best chance of getting them into position of power. In this context, Duverger (1959) argues that a high doorsill of success generates consolidation in a party system. Thus only relatively big and large parties, especially ruling parties in Africa are electorally viable. Suffice, to say, for instance, that majority or plurality system in single-member

districts or constituencies suggest a high threshold of success. This is because only one top contender among many wins the one seat only. This electoral system is commonly known as first-past-the post (FPTP). The candidate that obtains more votes than any other is elected even if he/she only won a minority of votes cast in a particular election. This is otherwise known as ‘winner-take-all’ system. Its main characteristics include the following:

- Only one candidate is elected in each electoral contest
- Voters get one vote on the ballot, placing a mark next to the candidate of their choice
- Voters select individual candidates in their riding. There is no vote for the party or leader.
- Candidates can be elected without a majority of votes. There is no minimum number of votes required to win.
- The winning party can form a majority government without receiving a majority of the popular vote.
- It results into single party majority governments.
- One or two parties usually receive between 80-90 per cent of all votes.
- The winning party can receive a disproportionate share of the seats with less than a majority of votes – a so called “exaggerated majority.”
- Smaller parties win few seats even with 10 per cent or more of the popular vote.
- The party winning the most seats in the legislature forms the government with its leader becoming the premier.

The first-past-the-post electoral system and institutional designs, political parties are causes and consequences of each other. They have interwoven and reciprocal relationship. Nigeria adopted the single member plurality electoral system in the 1979, 1983, 1999, 2003 and 2007 general elections. In this context, this paper aims to entangle the extent to which this electoral system and institutional designs affect party institutionalisation in the country.

II. Research Objectives

To this extent, the research objectives are to:

- i. examine the extent to which the electoral system (first-past-the post) affects the external and internal dimensions of the activities of political parties;
- ii. identify the main institutional designs influencing party institutionalisation in Nigeria;

- iii. Critically investigate various dimensions through which Nigeria's electoral system affects citizens' political behaviour towards the parties.

III. Research Questions

The main research questions are:

- i. To what extent does Nigeria's electoral system affect party institutionalisation?
- ii. What are the institutional designs influencing party institutionalisation in Nigeria?
- iii. What are the various dimensions through which both institutional designs and electoral system affect citizens' political behaviour and why?

IV. Research methodology: Mixed method approach

There is of course no single accepted way of conducting research. The ways researchers carry out their research depend upon a variety of factors. These factors, according to Snape and Spencer (2003: 1), include: researchers' beliefs about the nature of the social world and what can be known about it (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (epistemology), the purposes and goals of the research, the characteristics of the research participants, the audience for the research, the financiers of the research, and the position and environment of the researchers themselves.

Mixed method is selected as the most suitable method of conducting this study. This is otherwise known as concurrent triangulation strategy. It involves the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, and produce results more than what individual method could provide (Cresswell, 2003; Morgan, 1998; Lieberman, 2005). It is also good for triangulations (Jick, 1979). According to Cresswell *et al* (2000:7), mixed methods approach:

[...] holds the potential for rigorous, methodologically sound studies [and involves] integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis in a single study or a program of inquiry. This form of research is more than simply collecting both quantitative and qualitative data; it indicates that data will be integrated, related, or mixed at some stage of the research process.... When used in combination, both quantitative and qualitative data yield a more complete analysis, and they complement each other.

Owing to the general limitations of quantitative methods in capturing the “fabric of global phenomena that include complex interactions of culture, institutions, societal norms and government regulations, among a few concerns” (Kiessling and Harvey, 2005:22) and the necessity to understand informants’ perceptions about party activities, it was employed simultaneously with qualitative method.

Quantitative method was meant to bridge the gap created by qualitative techniques. Bryman (2004: 46) maintains that a qualitative approach to research delineates “an approach to the study of the social world which seeks to describe and analyse the culture and behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied.” Strauss and Corbin (1990: 17) conceive it as “any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification.” In other words, in investigating the issue of party institutionalisation, one must delve into the context and interact with party functionaries and other political architects of party creation and management to critically understand their views, attitudes and experiences on specific issues regarding political parties. Rules, norms, regulations, values, views and behaviours are the institutional issues that are largely non-statistical constructs, hence not easily amenable to quantification. Also, in this kind of research, defining a statistical sample is very difficult if not impossible. The process of party organisation and the nature of its administrative process and functionaries differ from one party to another. This dynamism and difference can only be adequately captured by qualitative techniques.

Moreover, socio-cultural issues, norms, economy, politics and other idiosyncratic variables and internal party dynamics can only be captured and investigated through mixed methods because of its flexibility and depth in capturing these complexities. Importantly, employing this approach provides the benefits of complementarities of the two distinct methods and especially in ensuring “methodological rigour as well as measures for reliability and validity” (Kiessling and Harvey, 2005). In fact, according to Cresswell (2003:217) mixed methods strategy enables integration of interpretation which “can either note the convergence of the findings as a way to strengthen the knowledge claims of the study or explain any lack of convergence that may result. [Thus it] can result in well-validated and substantiated findings.” Indeed, mixed methods according to Cresswell and as discovered by this study is suitable for

research with shorter fieldwork duration and tied to a limited time frame and resources.

Moreover, qualitative techniques are suitable for their taking onboard people's experiences and the meaning they individually or collectively attach to the dynamism of party activities and electoral system. This approach, with its characteristics of profundity and thoroughness, is more particularistic about contextual issues (Devine, 2002: 199) such as political party organisation, administrative arrangement, values, adaptability and electoral system. This is done by placing informants' attitudes and behaviour in the context of their individual experiences and the wider social, economic and political settings under which elections are conducted and political parties operate. This is a holistic approach that captures the meanings, divergent views, process and context (Bryman, 1988: 62; Devine, 2002: 199), that are the defining elements of the study of electoral system, institutional designs and political party institutionalisation in Nigeria.

The study adopted an inductive approach in which "theory and evidence are interwoven to create a unified whole; and the concepts and generalisations are wedded to their context" (Neuman, 2003:79). Contrastingly, quantitative methods are relevant for theory testing or verification and hypothesis testing (Cresswell, 2003; Montiel, 1998). Moreover, quantitative techniques assume a "universal paradigm" that "uses evidence to test generalisations of an abstract and law-like character and tends towards acceptance of convergence" (Kiessling and Harvey, 2005:30). Quantitative approach is positivist and deductive in nature. Positivist approach is limited compared to interpretivist, as the later is more "sensitive to context" (Neuman, 2003:80). Due to its sensitivity to context, interpretive approach has "limited generalisations", which are context specific. Generally, quantitative data and analysis are suitable to case studies only when they are "not too complex" (Gillham, 2000:80). That is why simple descriptive statistics, such as percentages, averages, totals, etc., are relevant in this study as against technically complicated inferential statistics that deal with complex correlations (Kiessling and Harvey, 2005). Nevertheless, qualitative methods, as explained earlier will add value to the data and findings by its ability to capture complex socio-cultural issues, "people's experiences and gives meaning to events, processes and the environment of their normal setting" (Kiessling and Harvey,

2005:30). Thus, mixed method approach, case study design and the variety of data collection instruments will help to collect large volume of data, which ensure adequate analysis and presentation of credible findings.

For the qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with relevant party officials and officials of the Nigeria's electoral commission. Included in the interview will be key political figures, such as chairmen of local governments, governors and members of the legislature. Similarly, as part of the qualitative approach to the study, documentary analysis will be employed. This a situation where relevant documents, such as newspapers, books, journals, party documents and election results, electoral acts, etc will be critically analysed in relation to the major objectives of the study. Questionnaires will be administered to voters to determine their changing behaviour towards political parties given the nature of the electoral system *vis-à-vis* the activities of the parties. While, discourse analysis will be employed in analysing the qualitative primary data, simple arithmetical calculations will be used in analysing data generated from the questionnaire survey.

V. Literature review and theoretical framework

Literature will be drawn largely from the areas of party and party system institutionalisation and electoral system. Specifically, on party institutionalisation, works of Randall and Svasand (1999, 2001, 2002a and b), Randall (2006, 2007) and Mainwaring and Scully (1995), Mainwaring (1988) Dix (1992), Panebianco (1988), Ragsdale and John (1997), Mainwaring (2001), Kura (2008), Birch, (2001) and many others will be critically reviewed. Thus for lack of a conceptual model and/or theoretical framework for studying electoral system, institutional designs and party institutionalisation, a theoretical framework will be build on the basis of critical analysis of relevant literature on these trio issues.

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