

Opposition parties and democratic consolidation: A comparative analysis of Sri Lanka and Nigeria's democracies

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Abstract

The survival of any democracy depends largely on the functions of the existing institutions within the social system. Political parties in our modern day democracy were identified as one such important institution. It has been observed that without well-functioning parties, governments and legislatures have little chance of representing wider society in a meaningful way. Parties are the bridge between government and society, both in the ways they translate society's demands into political ideas and programs, and in the way they hold government to account on society's behalf. Therefore, the need for strong and sustainable political parties with the capacity to represent citizens and provide policy choices that demonstrate their ability to govern for the public good cannot be over-emphasized. This paper uses content analysis and interviews to examine the role played by opposition parties in democratic consolidation in emerging democracies such as Sri Lanka and Nigeria. It is also the objective of the research to determine the effectiveness of the political parties in containing the challenges of growing complexity of anti-democratic forces.

Keywords: Social System, Political Parties, Sustainable, Democratic Consolidation

Introduction

The survival of modern day democracy depends largely on the existence and effective functioning of institutions of government, as well as other institutions within the social system, such as political parties, civil society organizations, and the media. Although political parties worldwide, suffer serious setbacks; and are increasingly seen as corrupt, run by people who are more interested in their own advancement than the good of the people they represent, democracy is inconceivable without political parties. They provide the needed support for a balanced functioning of the democratic system. Political parties in collaboration with the above institutions play an important role as a vehicle of political change. They recruit leaders, disseminate information, simplify voting choices, encourage competition, unify the electorate, connect society and the state, and manage conflicts of interest to provide a platform for unity in heterogeneous societies such as Sri Lanka, and Nigeria. As an opposition, parties serve as vanguards that protect the country (national interest) from the government (elite/leadership).

Democracy needs strong and sustainable political parties with the capacity to represent citizens and provide policy choices that demonstrate their ability to govern for the public good. With an increasing disconnect between citizens and their elected leaders, a decline in political activism, and a growing sophistication of anti-democratic forces, democratic political parties are continually challenged (Johnston, 2005). While the importance of political parties is obvious for the survival and durability of democracy, given the above explanation, it is axiomatic to say that for there to be strong and sustainable democracy there is need for vibrant opposition parties. This study sets out to examine the role of opposition parties in Nigeria and Sri Lanka, their effectiveness in strengthening democracy, and the existing challenges, and the possible solutions to mitigate those challenges.

Research objectives

The study is set out to achieve the following four objectives: to examine the contribution of opposition parties in democratic consolidation in the two countries; to determine the effectiveness of the opposition parties in meeting the challenges of democracy in Sri Lanka and Nigeria; to identify the problems of opposition parties, and to look for possible solutions to these challenges.

Methodology

The method adopted in the course of this research is content analysis using mainly secondary data; complemented with interviews to balance the information. The secondary data include existing literature on the topic such as books, journals, conference papers, and newspapers.

Conceptual Clarification

Democracy:

The term “democracy” is derived from two Greek words – demos (or people) and kratos (rule). By implication, democracy means the acceptance of the basic equality of men and women as humans and the basic responsibility of all adult men and women for their own destiny. Norberto Bobbio (Ogundiya, 2011) defined democracy as a cluster of rules permitting the broadest, surest, direct and indirect participation of the majority of citizens in political decisions. For example, in decisions affecting the whole community, (Caron, 1992 in Ogundiya, 2011:3). It is also viewed as a “system of elected representative government operated under the rule of law, where the most significant groups in the population participate in the political process and have access to effective representation in the practice of making governmental decisions. That is of allocating resources.” (Dahl, 1982:11).

Democracy is a fluid term employed by people from diverse backgrounds and ideological persuasions (Bilkisu, 2002). Democracy is a very controversial concept with numerous and contradictory definitions which reflect systems of ideology. For instance, we have ‘People’s democracy,’ ‘Guided democracy,’ and ‘People’s democratic dictatorship’ as in the Chinese model. However, important and common to all these variant democracies is that they are not personal rule, and that they are different from authoritarian/ dictatorial rule. There are three main models of democracy along which many modern nation states predicate their political systems, namely: liberal democracy, socialist democracy, and direct democracy (Jega & Wakili, 2002, Malam, 2009).

Representative democracy, as a style of government, is based on a number of assumptions, and has a number of defining properties, which according to Kornberg (1992), include, but are not necessarily limited to: (1) The legitimacy of the government rests on a claim to represent the desire of its citizens. That is, the claim of the government in obedience to its laws is based on the government’s assertion to be doing what the people want it to do. (2) The organized arrangement that regulates this bargain of legitimacy is the competitive political election. Leaders are elected at regular intervals, and voters can choose among alternative candidates. In practice, at least two political parties that have a chance of winning are needed to make such choice meaningful. (3) Most adults can participate in the electoral process, both as voters and as candidates for important political office. (4) Citizens’ votes are secret and not coerced. (5) Citizens and leaders enjoy basic freedom of speech, press, assembly, and organization. Both established parties and new ones can work to gain members and voters (Malam, 2009). The constitutional existence of these principles and their application are entirely different things altogether. Democracy is determined by the effective application of these principles.

Political parties in the democratic system

A political party is a social group as defined by Herbert Simon (1983), as a system of interdependent activities characterized by a high degree of rational direction of behavior towards achieving common acknowledgment and expectation. It is different from other social groups, such as labour unions and other associations because of the unique functions a political party performs for the system, such as organizing public opinion, communicating demands to the centre of governmental decision-making and political recruitment. This is why a political party is taken as a useful index of the level of political development. Hence the relationship between a viable party system and a democratic order is self-evident, (Omoruyi, 2001). Parties in theory, provide the medium through which the accountability of the executive and the legislators to the electorate is exercised through periodic elections under multiparty electoral politics. Kiiza, (2005), identified a number of important variables obtainable in an ideal democratic setting, among others:

That in competitive multi-party politics, the party that is elected to form government seeks to enact into law a number of policies and programs (oftentimes consistent with their election manifesto). Opposition parties are on the other hand free to criticize the ruling party's policies, ideas and programs and offer alternatives. Democratic parties recognize and respect the authority of the elected government even when their party leaders are not in power; that, the notion of a loyal opposition is central to any true democracy. It means that all sides in the political debate – however deep their differences – share the fundamental democratic values of freedom of speech, the rule of law and equal protection under the law; that, parties that lose elections become the opposition. The opposition, then, is essentially a “government-in-the-waiting. And that for a culture of democracy to take hold, opposition parties need to have the confidence that the political system will guarantee their right to organize, speak, disagree and/or criticize the party in power. Opposition parties also need to be assured that in due course, they will have a chance to campaign and re-seek the people's mandate in and through regular, free and fair elections. (Kiiza, 2005: 4)

It follows, therefore, that the culture of democracy rests on the principle of majority rule, coupled with tolerance of dissenting views. Democracy also calls for the zealous protection of the fundamental rights of individuals, disadvantaged groups and minorities, even when they disagree with the ideology, policies and agenda of the ruling party. This suggests that non-majoritarian governance is possible or even desirable. By “non-majoritarian” governance is meant a system of rule that strikes an acceptable balance between the rights of the majority (expressed through free and fair elections) and the duty of the polity to accommodate the rights of all (minorities and marginalized social groups, such as women and differently abled people). Non-

majoritarian governance is critical of the 'winner-takes all' ideology of Western liberal democracy. It is driven by the logic of inclusive politics and sharing power among rival claimants to scarce public resources such as power or official jobs (Kiiza, 2005).

Role of Opposition Parties

The following have been identified among others as roles played by opposition parties. These include: (1) Interest aggregation: Political parties are important organs for aggregating the interests of the political community. Interest aggregation often culminates in the articulation/ projection of certain preferences, values and ideologies into the policy and lawmaking process (e.g. in Parliament) and in the budgeting process; (2) Promoting responsible and reasoned debate. This promotes 'national conversation' and pushes democratic discussion to a higher level of political development and maturity; (3) Maintaining touch with the voter-citizen and demonstrating the relevance of politics to ordinary people, and especially, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised; and (4) Opposition parties hold the government to account for its commissions or omissions. Parties present a viable alternative to the incumbent government by designing alternative ideas, principles and policies for governing society. Should the party in power let the voters down, the "government-in-waiting" takes over the reign of power through free and fair election; (5) Parties act as a training ground for future leaders; (6) Parties strengthen the culture of democracy within the party and the political community in general (by, for example, promoting open debate during delegates' conferences, promoting intra-party democratic elections and ensuring accountable use of party finances; (7) Parties work with the Electoral Commission, the mass media and civil society organizations to monitor and improve the quality of voter registration, civic education and electoral transparency; and (8) Opposition parties are the unpaid but dedicated principal researchers for the government in power (ibid).

The experience of political parties in Nigeria

The extent to which political parties perform the above functions largely depends on the level of political institutionalization of political parties and their institutional strengths and by extension, the strengths of democracy. A well institutionalized, political party can serve as a set of mediating institutions through which differences in ideas, interests and perception of political problems at a given time can be managed (Omotola, 2009). From the assessment of Nigerian political parties, findings were that, the present predicament is connected to the past, even prior to independence. Political parties were not national in structure and outlook; this defect, traceable from the pre-colonial era, undermined the possibility of laying a solid foundation for democracy. A platform for establishing national parties for unity in a heterogeneous Nigeria was lost. In the words of Yahya (2006), one aspect of the party system during the first republic was that political parties were not formally registered nor was their formation guided by the constitution. Thus, there were several parties that existed and contested elections

and “many of these parties served local interests, while some were influenced from overseas,” (Malam, 2011: 09). Much damage was caused in the absence of uniform constitutional guidance over the establishment and operation of these political parties.

The trend worsened in the post independent era, with politicians exploiting the divisions within the parties to score political points. Ethnic identity, regionalism and religion, became prominent. Political parties turned into organs not for organizing the broad masses of the country to form the building blocks of a dynamic nation-state, nor for articulating programs to pursue national goals for the majority, but for winning elections by political elites. The parties differed only in names, lacking in substance, democratic ethics, and above all, principles for which ideal parties are known. Politicians easily changed their party affiliations. The party leadership mostly became representative of the membership, and the leader represented the party elite, (Omoruyi, 2001; Junadu, 2011).

The fundamental determinants of affiliation to political party under a healthy democratic system such as ideology, manifesto, credibility of the leadership and nationalism were all lost to parochial appeals. Because of the centrifugal consequences of the ethno-regionalization and the personalization of party politics, particularly between 1951 and 1965; Nigeria has moved towards reform of the party system, such as internal organization or democracy, and recognition and registration by an electoral body (Junaidu, 2011). Junaidu (ibid) points out further that the efforts to reform the party system by the military regimes to de-emphasize the personalization of party politics have not (i) resolved the problem of the political mobilization of ethnicity as a salient factor in Nigeria’s competitive party and electoral politics, although they may have domesticated it within the parties; (ii) brought about internal democracy within the parties; (iii) reduced election-related violence; (iv) created an atmosphere conducive to inter-party dialogue and credible competitive party and electoral governance. Therefore, these ethnic based political parties continue to operate to date. Politicians resort to these primordial means to canvass support in elections and even when in power as a shield from other oppositions and the law. Omoruyi (2001) has this to say while assessing the political parties:

There is nothing called organization in these parties to be analyzed. With the exception of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) to some extent, the other parties only exist as organization around certain offices in states or in local government areas with no link with the national offices based at Abuja. The PDP is run as factions and caucus with many big men posing members of the Board of Trustees and others posing as Elders and Leaders of the party on the one hand and the President's men on the other. The collision between the arms of the party and the official leaders of the party is inevitable from time to time. (Omoruyi, 2001: 14)

Omoruyi (ibid) is of the view that the so-called political parties are not in competition with one another. They are in factions; these factions are more in competition within themselves than with another party. He further opined that the program of these political parties, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All People's Party (APP) were status quo parties when they were formed, given their capitalist and conservative dispositions. Despite the Alliance for Democracy (AD), and its progressive and radical appearance, none of them seems to have clear policy positions besides wanting to occupy the vacant positions at all levels of the federation. They are mere platforms for contesting elections and not representatives of any interest. Opposition parties are politically undemocratic, structurally weak, and economically dependent without viable sources of funding, leading to compromising issues of participation and democracy. Professional management of parties was ignored leading to lack of party administrative accountability, and high indiscipline. The consequence is the preponderance of so many unethical, unfair and uncivilized practices by party leaders and public representatives of political parties, including public officials. Knowledge, logic, convention, qualification, skill and experience carry little weight. Candidates were mostly appointed by the party leadership leaving no option to the electorate; elections were mostly rigged, abusing the cardinal principle of free and fair elections. This was evident in the past elections with All Nigeria Peoples' Party (ANPP) as an opposition in 2003; and 2007 elections; and of Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) and Action Congress Party (ACP) in Nigeria's 2011 elections. The Opposition party leaders mostly, get co-opted by the ruling party, thereby weakening the opposition and giving the incumbent party a free hand to operate. Public resources and government institutions and properties including security outfits were used to the advantage of the ruling party. One hardly differentiates the party from the government (Bappah, 2012).

Despite a series of constitutional attempts to evolve a party system, which would promote a stable contest between parties, presumably characterized by different programs manifested in issue-oriented ideologies, what emerged in practice was transactional politics based on opportunistic and informal networks of politicking, replete with intra-party factionalism that constantly led to shifting alliances; a situation which unavoidably supplanted the formal structures of party organization.

Opposition Parties and democracy in Sri Lanka

At independence, Sri Lanka had all the trappings of a democratic state and was indeed regarded as a beacon of hope for democracy. Even though few political parties were ideologically oriented, such as the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist party (CP), (Warnapala, 2010), it had a record of exceptional vibrant-multi-party democracy, and was adjudged, in comparison with the then many emergent nation-states of Asia and Africa, as an exceptionally successful nation of transformation from a colony to independent nationhood and of democratic governance thereafter, (Wilson,

1974). However, in spite of the popular involvement in electoral politics, successive regimes since independence failed to incorporate diverse ethnic groups into the polity through integration, leading to a great divide.

In the time since independence, consideration of religion, language and culture has largely displaced ideology as the issues around which multi-ethnic Sri Lanka's political life evolves. Ethnic struggle and violence between the government dominated by the majority Sinhalese, and militant minority Tamil separatists has dominated the political process (Navaratna-Bandara, 2006; Peiris, 2006; Warnapala, 2010). Sri Lanka drifted into crises mainly due to its failure to manage its economy and polity, the conflict that was generated during the continued exercise of democratic power. These mistakes that were made in the independence constitution, and the economic reforms of the late 1970s, were later to have a chain reaction with other elements leading to a serious drawback in Sri Lanka's democracy and political parties. Some political analysts are of the view that inherent in Sri Lanka's crisis of governance was the introduction and operation of the 'Executive Presidency.' The change to the 'Executive Presidency' that was brought about in 1978, by the then UNP (United National Party) government, gives the President full executive powers as head of the executive arm and the Cabinet of ministers (De Costa, 1985). The introduction of this distorted unitary model, provides a president with unprecedented power that renders epileptic the parliament and the judiciary. The near unlimited power enjoyed by the President led to the exclusion of minorities and minority sensitivities in the sphere of political decision-making (Navaratna-Bandara, 2006). In the words of Javid (2009),

Sri Lanka's experience of the executive presidency has been an unmitigated disaster with the period of its existence described as the worst period in post-independence history, it has disempowered parliament creating a category of servile, sycophantic, opportunistic, politicians without any vision who are unable to make any meaningful contribution to the formulation of national and legislative policy. They are simply a rubber stamp to president's decisions. (Javid, 2009: News)

The powers were increased over time, and with the expansion of executive powers so also was the weakening of the other institutions, parliament and the judiciary. Equally, the same applied to the opposition parties who were powerless before the government. The plight of the UNP is given in Peiris (2006) and Somasundara, (PC), amongst others.

PC Somasundara J. K. an interview with Professor Jaya Kodi Somasundara on Parties and Politics in Sri Lanka, February 16, 2012.

The UNP was identified as a party that had in 1950s and 1970s developed a party organization that extended over the entire country. Despite the fact that the leadership consisted largely of wealthy and socially privileged persons, and though the party policies were associated with mildly liberal brand of conservatism, the UNP was able to draw widespread electoral support from almost all areas other than the predominantly Tamil areas of the Northern province, and from all social groups other than the organized working class in Colombo. (Peiris, 2006: 348).

The economic reforms brought about by UNP-led governments in the late 1970s and other policies and developmental projects were especially scarcely felt in the predominantly Tamil areas of the north. This was believed to be a factor that led to the heightening of economic grievances expressed by the minorities of the region. Again, the social welfare which aimed at the satisfaction of minimum livelihood had a very negative effect on economic growth, and it fell far short of fulfilling the aspirations of the poor, more significantly the scope for upward social mobility through education, a feature of the country's socio-economic advances of earlier times, was no longer in existence (ibid).

Concomitantly, some scholars are of the view that the implicit social contract entered into between the state and its citizens via "social welfare" which began as far back as 1931 becomes inherent in Sri Lanka's democratic realm as a right that any attempt to deviate from it cannot be tolerated, (Guntalleke, 2005). The mismanagement and heavy public expenditure to satisfy the short-term expectations of the electorates is believed to have connections with increasing economic crisis, poverty and developmental stagnation. The policy is understood by the two leading political parties as unhealthy economically, yet none can dare to move it either as a party in power or as an opposition party. In the absence of any meaningful move at sanitizing the political arena with true democratic issues, any party in power exploits the moment to siphon the already scarce resources in the name of "social welfare," leaving the vast majority in abject poverty, especially those in the periphery.

Political parties have resorted to ethnic affiliation and other elemental issues that hinder the attainment of true goals of democracy. This is clearly seen, especially given the fact that the distinction that hitherto existed between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and United National Party (UNP) has tended to blur with the passage of time. In economic affairs, the SLFP often claimed to pursue a left-of-centre stance (as distinct from a right-of-centre stance) which according to Peiris (2006) observers often ascribe to the UNP. Moreover, the liberal policy brought about by the then UNP government in the late 1970s, in spite of its defeat, was continued by the SLFP-led government with JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) as its main partner without any significant departure. Again, the SLFP was believed to have no clear cut policies being a conglomeration

of alliances, its policies largely dependent on the dictates of the radical left, and on external pressures such as those exerted by donors of aid.

The above realities and the new dimension politics is taking, in resorting to primitive appeals, further contributed to the weakening of democracy in Sri Lanka. Given the strategy of divide and rule employed in the People's Alliance (PA) led government that tends to tilt towards the Sinhalese, on one hand, and the emergence of politicians that were believed to be opportunists lacking in experience who were able to make it to the corridors of power not because of charisma, money, media backing or power, but, simply because of the Sinhalese ideal they held firm, and ardent opposition to any proposal which it perceives as having the potential of strengthening the hands of those espousing the cause of Eelam (Peiris, 2006). This was especially evident in the two political parties, namely JVP and JHU (Jathika Hela Urumaya), and was considered the singular factor behind their victory in the 2004 parliamentary elections. JHU's uncompromising stance against the concept of self-determination for the northeast – the core demand of the LTTE, has received significant endorsement from the Sinhalese segment of the electorate especially in the urban areas of the south-west, from which it secured much of its support.

From the assessment made, it is evident that opposition parties in Sri Lanka are structurally weak, small in size, and deficient in terms of tangible alternatives capable of making any political relevance as an opposition. They have no agenda, which is different from that of the ruling party, they have similar appeal and strategy; worse still, they are faced with lack of internal democracy. The only party that seems capable of contending with the ruling party is the UNP which is now in a serious leadership crisis and lacks internal democracy.

The party in power has the upper hand financially, and exploits the disadvantages inherent in the opposition parties. The relevance of opposition parties largely depends on their ability to mobilize a democratically acceptable agenda different from what the incumbent party provides. There is a need for embracing democratically acceptable values, which are objective, impartial, and aim at providing national leadership that can accommodate all; accord fundamental rights of citizens; and provide practical solutions for mutual coexistence among the national diversities.

Recommendations

There is a need to restructure, and re-institutionalize political parties in order to shape democracy. A crucial challenge before opposition parties in both countries is the need to properly restructure internal party organization with the objective of developing a service framework around which citizens' mobilization can take place. Restructuring internal party organization would require clear definition and delineation

of responsibilities. In other words, there is the urgent need to professionalize the workings of the parties if they are to meet the expectations of their respective countries. The goal is to deepen democracy within opposition parties, before parties can become champions of national democracy, human rights and good governance (Kiiza, 2005; Peiris, 2006; Lukman, 2012).

The goals of democracy can only be achieved where and when these institutions are in place; otherwise a true measure of socio-economic development would continue to remain an illusion. Vibrant civil society and independent media are needed for a successful reform of this nature. Equally, the academics, in Sri Lanka should borrow from Nigeria by becoming frontliners of the nation's struggle against government excess. In Nigeria, the Academic Staff Union of Universities plays an important role in strongly opposing government in policies that are perceived to be in the interest of the ruling class and detrimental to the general public and the nation at large.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it could be concluded that, in both Sri Lanka and Nigeria, parties have not been able to attain a reasonable degree of institutionalization especially in the areas of internal cohesion and discipline. This deficiency has also contributed to the decline of the conflict management capacity of the parties at both intra- and inter-party levels. The parties have found it extremely difficult to emphasize politics of issues. Rather, their mobilization of popular forces has been largely driven by ethnicity/ language and religion, as much as the influence of money politics. In the circumstances, parties have suddenly descended to the level of being used to promote personal and sectional interests at the expense of the collective good, national integration and development of countries, (Lukman, 2012; Junadu, 2011; Navaratna-Bandara, 2006; Peiris, 2006). The incapacity of the parties as opposition could also be attributed to lack of sufficient funds, making it difficult for them to compete favourably with the party in power.

The expected role to be played by parties as opposition was seriously inadequate due to the existing lapses in the parties and the level of commitment of politicians to the national cause. Both countries experimented with the executive presidency, but the excessive power enjoyed by the executive arm seriously undermines the quality of democracy. The ruling parties in the respective countries tend to become so identified with the government, bureaucracy, the legislature, the judiciary, the army and even treasury that their separate character collapses almost completely. These are fundamental challenges to achieving any meaningful contributions to the democratic consolidation of the respective countries. Importantly, in both countries the executive arm is too centralized and enjoys enormous powers, which in themselves suffocate the opposition with little room for survival, unless these powers are checked for democracy to thrive.

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