

Party merger and democratic consolidation: Reflection on the rise of APC in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

From 1999 to 2011 General Elections, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), dominated and had a telling impact on the Nigerian body polity. Within this period, the PDP not only produced all the presidents, it also garnered majority seats in both chambers of the National Assembly and consistently won over two-thirds of governorship elections in the country. It is within this context, that three of Nigeria's opposition parties merged in 2013 to form a mega opposition party named All Progressives Congress (APC). This paper, using a qualitative method of data collection and analysis, analyzed the factors that led to the emergence of the APC and its implications on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Considering the fact that the paper is premised on "Party Merger" and "Democratic Consolidation"; Heuristic Framework of Party Merger have been carefully adopted as theoretical framework to analyze the rise of the APC ahead of the 2015 elections that set Nigeria on a trajectory towards consolidating its democracy, transitioning from a largely unstable and expedient experiment to the realm of political maturity. Therefore, the paper concluded that existence of credible, strong and challenging opposition is important for the consolidation of democracy.

Keywords: Party, merger, democracy, consolidation, election, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Multi-party democracy started in Nigeria with the introduction of elective principle in the 1922 Clifford's Constitution which disposed the Nigerian Council of Lord Lugard (1914) and set up a new Legislative Council for the Southern Protectorate and granted the franchise to elect four representatives, 3 from Lagos and 1 from Calabar. The political parties that emerged to contest the elective positions were regional in outlook and none of the political parties could represent the interest of the country (Monica, 2012). The first political party in Nigeria, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) emerged in 1923. For years, the UNDP was hegemonic in its dominance in electoral politics in Lagos. This was to be challenged by the Lagos Youth Movement - latter Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) - formed in 1934 and defeated the NNDP for the three seats allocated to Lagos that year (Omotola, 2009).

By 1944, the increasing tempo of party politics resulted in the formation of another political party – the National

Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), which later became the National council of Nigerian Citizens. Shortly, Egbe Omo Oduduwa, a Yoruba socio-cultural organization, transformed into a political party, the Action Group (AG) in 1950 and the Northern People Congress (NPC) emerged in 1959 with dominance in the northern region. By 1951, a breakaway faction of the NPC consisting mainly of radical youths based in Kano formed the Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) (Omotola, 2009).

The multi-party democracy continued even after the Independence in 1960, until the military incursion into Nigerian politics in 1966, which ushered a pro-long military rule for almost 32 years (interspersed by period of democracy in 1979-1983 and 1992-1993) before the military disengaged from politics in 1999. Since the return of democracy in 1999, during the euphoria of the "third wave of democratization", Nigeria introduced liberal democracy - the kind of democracy practiced in the West

but now foisted on weaker states as a precondition for aid and productive cooperation (Tar, 2010).

Nigeria's liberal democracy landed on a good platform with the existence of democratic institutions, plural society, vibrant civil society organizations and critical mass media among others (Burnell et al., 2011). These ingredients have the structure and capacity to make democracy thrive in Nigeria. But it is germane to note that, Nigeria's democracy continue to suffer gradual corrosion (leading to fuzzy semi-democracy, to some hybrid regime somewhere in the middle of the road between liberal democracy and dictatorship). Which in the end would lead to what Guillermo O'Donnell called a "*democradura*" a repressive façade democracy (O'Donnell, 1992). For example, despite the constitutional requirement that presidential candidate has to get 25% of the total votes in 2/3 states of the 36 states and FCT; from 1999 to 2015, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) not only produced all the presidents, it garnered majority seats in both houses of the national parliament and constantly won over two-thirds of governorship elections in the country. This situation not only generated some complacency within the PDP with regard to national governance, it denied the PDP alternative policy. More worrisome, the PDP rule was "overheated by lots of challenges namely: corruption, electoral abnormalities, the politics of *god-fatherism*, incessant poverty reinforced by mass unemployment, security question etc" (Kwasau, 2013). These challenges strongly affected democratic stability and consolidation (Aduku and Umoru, 2014). The opposition parties which ought to serve as alternative parties from which the electorate should choose if they so desire, have been strategically weakened through the overt and covert strategies of the ruling PDP and the lack of commitment on the part of politicians to the national course (Dode, 2010). The bandwagon political migration of everybody into the PDP led Nwankwo (2015) to conclude that "the only way to establish an alternative government to the PDP rule is through a constitutional amendment that would entrench only two-party system with limited opportunities for cross-carpeting by politicians" (p. 3).

However, Nigeria's story has not been, entirely, one long, unrelieved history of despair. Nigeria's three biggest opposition parties merged on 6th February, 2013 to form a mega opposition party named All Progressives Congress (APC). It was the first time since the return of democracy in 1999 that registered political parties voluntarily gave up their individual identities to coalesce into a new political party. As a result of this merger, the 2015 general elections were fiercer than most, with expectations that they would end in a contentious stalemate at best, and engulf the country in violent political crisis at worst (more so as quite a number of Cassandras have since opined on the expected mortality of the Nigerian state). Yet, the actual conduct and outcome of the elections defied

expectations. Not only did Nigeria conduct its most credible and transparent elections since independence with minimal violence but, for the first time in the country's history, an opposition party – (APC) – defeated an entrenched ruling party (PDP). The peaceful and credible conduct of these polls has set Nigeria on a trajectory towards consolidating its democracy, transitioning from a largely unstable and expedient experiment in 1999 to the realm of political maturity.

Many scholars and opinion molders have written extensively on the merger of the APC, the prospects of a two-party system in Nigeria, as well as prognoses and analyses on the role of the APC in the 2015 elections. Another influx of studies pointed to various reasons PDP lost the 2015 presidential election. Thus, the objective of this paper is to push further a thread of discussion on this topic, by presenting a detailed analysis of the factors that facilitated the fusion of the opposition parties that led to the emergence of the APC, as well as wave of massive defections from the PDP to the APC ahead of the 2015 elections.

THEORETICAL ANCHORAGE

In our trade in social sciences, we do our bargaining with the help of theory (Akinboye, 2013). Theory and practice address critical issues and cover the gap that may exist in the academic world. Considering the fact that the paper is premised on "Party Merger" and "Democratic Consolidation"; Heuristic Framework of Party Merger have been carefully adopted as theoretical framework.

Heuristic Framework of Party Merger

Coffé Hilde and Torenvlied René of Utrecht University, Netherlands came up with "A Heuristic Framework of Party Merger" as a first attempt to fill the gap in research on party mergers as a particular type of party change. This "Heuristic Framework of Party Merger" served as a good theoretical framework of analysis. Influenced by general theories of party change (in particular Hamel and Janda, 1994), Coffe and Torenvlied (2008) introduced a Heuristic Framework of Party Merger that aims to describe the various interrelated factors that explain party mergers.

The Heuristic Framework of Party Merger identifies three (3) different types of factors that may act as catalysts for parties to merge. These three factors are: Contextual, Intra-party, and Inter-party factors. (a) Contextual factors: are "non-party specific" issues that trigger merger between political parties. (b) Intra-party factors: are factors "within parties" that drive dynamics within parties. (c) Inter-party factors: are factors between potential merging parties that drive interaction between

potential merging factors (Coffe and Torenvlied, 2008). According to Coffe and Torenvlied (2008:5) “party mergers are the result of a complex interplay between these three types or levels of factors”.

In their detailed study of the creation of the Conservative Party of Canada, Marland and Flanagan (2013) discovered that party mergers pass through many stages and are shaped by a myriad of temporal factors. First, conversation about aligning forces grows as the parties experience shocks and failures. The leadership becomes increasingly frustrated and with each disappointment a growing number of elites feel that uniting forces are necessary to improve their electoral prospects. A negotiation over private and public goods ensues. Finally, a tentative agreement between party executives is reached, and the formal ratification and implementation process is pursued. Observably, Marland and Flanagan’s organizational schema for the fusion of opposition parties validates the Heuristic Framework of Party Merger.

Let us use the Heuristic Framework of Party Merger to analyze the factors that informed the decision of three Nigeria’s opposition political parties and factions of two others to merge to form the All Progressives Congress (APC).

Contextual factors

Since the return of democracy in 1999, Nigeria operates a multi-party system in which more than two political parties operate in the Nigerian political scene. Though in the 1999 elections only three political parties (Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Peoples Party (APP), and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) were registered to compete in the elections, the number of registered political parties skyrocketed to 63 during the 2011 general elections. However, Nigeria’s *multi-partism* is a fragmented type made up of large number of opposition parties that are largely divided. Because of these serious divisions, the power of incumbency was reinforced. For example, from 1999 to 2011 Elections, the PDP not only produced all the presidents, it garnered majority seats in both houses of the national parliament and constantly won over two-thirds of governorship elections in the country. This situation has not only generated some complacency within the ruling party with regard to national governance, it has rendered the outcome of the presidential and many governorship elections predictable. In fact, former PDP chairman, Chief Vincent Ogbulafor, basking in the euphoria of the party’s victory at the 2007 polls declared that the PDP would rule the country for the next sixty years (Obah-Akpwohaha, 2013). This is what some schools of thought have identified as a march towards the dark alley of a one-party state.

Another contextual factor is the political topsy-turvy

arising from poor electoral process. The 2003 and 2007 general elections have been described as the worst in the nation’s history with brazen incidences of ballot stuffing and snatching, collusion among INEC staff, security officials and party leaders to rig elections across the country (Akhaine, 2011). Despite the fact that Nigeria received accolades over the conduct of the 2011 general elections from both local and foreign observers, a second assessment is that the 2011 elections demonstrated that the ruling politicians showed no genuine commitment to free and fair elections. The 2011 elections did not break that culture. This rigging culture was fuelled partly, by the politics of ethnicity, regionalism (zoning), religion, and the desperation of politicians to occupy or retain elective offices for the purpose of accumulating wealth (Okolo and Onunkwo, 2011).

Intra-party factors

The relative reach and strength of the hitherto strong opposition parties (ACN, ANPP, and CPC) make it an uphill task for any of them to give the PDP, with an advantage of several years of incumbency in majority of seats, a run for their money. The ACN had strong presence in the South-West and Mid-West (with six Governors), the ANPP had strong presence in the North-East and North-West (with three Governors), while the CPC had many supporters across the Northern Nigeria (but has only one Governor). On the other hand, the factions of APGA and DPP (which are also part of the merger arrangements) have been sidelined by the leadership of their respective parties. Thus, the PDP played on the deep mutual suspicions that exist between religions, regions, and ethnic groups in Nigeria to project itself as the only national party. In that way, opposition parties were only able to thrive in their regional strongholds leaving the PDP to hover around the national space virtually unchallenged for over a decade (Isibor, 2015).

It can also be argued from the political economy point of view that dominance of the ruling PDP persists in Nigeria because of the economic weaknesses of the opposition parties (weak economic base). While the ruling PDP can pay generously for her expenses and can use the governments’ coercive and mass media instruments in campaigning, media reach and vote buying (which is a common practice in Nigerian elections) to advance its goals, the opposition parties were economically weak.

Hence the only option for given an effective challenge would involve the emergence of a big party that can match the strength of the PDP. This can only emerge rapidly from a merger rather through the expansion and consolidation of each of the opposition parties whose strength and reach have been limited to specific

geographical and or/ethnic boundaries.

Inter-party factors

The three merged political parties (ACN, ANPP and CPC) are the strong opposition parties in Nigeria. As a result, they always worked in concert in constructive criticism of the PDP-led government. Apart from these, all other opposition parties are fragile entities, whose operate essentially as office-seeking rather than vote-seeking parties.

In addition to this, the ACN, ANPP, CPC, and DPP composed of like-minded people who had worked before under the same party. For example, General Muhammadu Buhari, a founder of CPC and its presidential candidate in 2011 elections, was a presidential candidate of ANPP in the 2003 and the 2007 elections before he decamped and set up "his" CPC in 2009. DPP (whose faction aligned with the merger arrangement) was founded by aggrieved members of the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). Many members of ACN and APGA (whose faction also aligned with the merger arrangement) have worked together under the defunct Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the aborted third republic.

Moreover, despite a lack of clear cut ideological divisions among Nigeria's political parties (Momoh, 2013), the merged parties have seemingly similar ideologies. For example, the ideology of ACN was a classical liberalism/progressivism. It is regarded as a natural successor to the progressive politics more closely associated with the defunct Action Group (AG) and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo in the first and second republic respectively. The political brain behind the party, Asiwaju Ahmed Tinubu, is noted for his astute pro-democracy credentials and progressive federalist principles.

ANPP was a right-wing conservative party with mass appeal because of its pro-poor policies. The ideology of the CPC lies towards the left-wing of the political spectrum, supporting individual liberty, rights and social welfare for the less privileged. APGA is a progressive party, founded in 2003 by late Chukwumeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (the leader of Biafra during Nigeria's 1967-1970 civil war), it is mainly associated with pro-poor policies aimed at empowering the masses. While, the DPP is a replica of the ANPP, it is a right-wing conservative party. Thus, despite the variation in names and ideologies that make them look like "strange bed fellows", all the merged political parties have been noted for their astute pro-democracy and progressive principles.

From the foregoing analysis, it can be seen that there are many inter-related factors: contextual, intra-party and inter-party that informed the decision of the opposition political parties to come together, set aside their political

differences to merge in order to form a progressive, broad-based national political movement known as the All Progressives Congress (APC), to balance the political equation as well as offer credible alternative to Nigerians, to have a robust choice from which to choose in the governance and development of the country. This would make elections more competitive. The competitiveness of elections would make the ruling party more alert, less complacent and conscious of the fact that it may lose the next election for non-performance. This can led to government effectiveness and effective growth with long-term economic benefits for citizens arising from democratic consolidation.

THE RISE OF APC

The All Progressives congress (APC) is a Nigerian political party formed on 6th February, 2013 in anticipation of the 2015 general elections. The party is the result of a merger by Nigeria's three biggest opposition parties- the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive change (CPC), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), factions of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) and Democratic People's Party (DPP).

ACN and CPC's efforts to work together began ahead of the 2011 general elections but were botched because of irreconcilable differences then, "ostensibly, over who would become its presidential flag bearer and what name it would be called" (Opoola, 2013). However, the talks were revived in 2012 with the two parties opting for merger. ACN chieftains saw that an ACN/CPC combination may not be enough to checkmate PDP, that more allies are needed from the East and even the North (Jega, 2013). The ANPP was then brought into consideration and later a faction of APGA also came in. Signs that merger talks were serious came when opposition party governors met on January 29, 2013 in Lagos where they announced their support for the plans. On February 5, 2013, leaders of the merger teams of the parties involved announced agreeing to the merger and unveiled the APC name in Abuja.

In a resolution signed by representatives of the four merging parties, they pledged that "...we the following progressive political parties namely ACN, ANPP, APGA, and CPC have resolved to merge forthwith and become the All Progressives Congress and offer to our beleaguered people a recipe for peace and prosperity" (Obla, 2013:1).

They further affirmed that:

"We resolve to form a political party committed to the principles of internal democracy, focused on serious issues of concern to our people, determined to bring corruption and insecurity to an end, determined to grow our economy and

create jobs in their millions through education, housing, agriculture, industrial growth, etc., and stop the increasing mood of despair and hopelessness among our people” (Obla, 2013:1).

But, the journey through the registration process was arduous (Mac-Leva and Olaniyi, 2013). In March, 2013, it was reported that two other political associations “alleged to be PDP sponsored”- African People’s Congress and All Patriotic Citizens- also applied for INEC registration, adopting APC as an acronym as well, reportedly “a development interpreted to be a move to thwart the successful merger of the opposition parties, ahead of the 2015 general election (Agbese, 2013). Later on, one of the APCs showed down but the other took its case to court when INEC rejected its application on the grounds of non-fulfillment of constitutional requirements. It was this court case that almost scuttled the APC’s bid.

However, the party received approval from the nation’s electoral umpire- INEC on July 31, 2013 to become a political party, and subsequently withdrew the operating licenses of the three previous and merging parties.

“The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has approved the application by three political parties- the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) - to merge into one, to be known as the All Progressives Congress” (Dimowa, 2014:1).

THE FALL OF PDP

The genesis of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) could be traced to the Institute of Civil Society (ICS) established in 1997 purposely to enlighten Nigerians about their “rights and obligations in a militarized political atmosphere (Maja-Pearce, 1999). The ICS later transformed into G18 (Group of 18), mostly Northern politicians and academics that vehemently opposed General Abacha’s planned self-succession. The G18 was later enlarged to G34 to include people from other regions equally opposed to Abacha military rule and particularly his self-succession political designs. Thus, the association was popularly known as G34. Following the death of Abacha in June 1998 and the unveiling of the transition programme under his successor, General Abubakar, the G34, along with other political associations endorsed the formation of PDP. The party was formally inaugurated on 31st August, 1998. Since the return of democracy in 1999, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) not only produced all the presidents, it also garnered majority seats in both houses of the national parliament and consistently won over two-thirds of governorship elections in the country.

However, the PDP’s lack of experience in dealing with a formidable opposition became apparent since the merger of opposition parties to form the All Progressives Congress (APC). Although the practice of carpet-crossing, defection or party switching is an undying attribute of party politics in Nigeria since Independence, the formation of APC heralded mass defections from PDP to APC on a non-election period (Nwanegbo et al., 2014). Exactly one month after the registration of APC, some states delegates, including 7 governors, led by former vice president Atiku Abubakar, had walked out of the August 31st special convention of PDP in Abuja in protest, to form “New PDP”. They cited systematic marginalization or relegation in the party many of them had helped to found. There were attempts to fix the division and halt what was widely seen as the imminent disintegration of PDP, a party that prides itself of being the largest in Africa. But amid allegations of insincerity, the damage control measures failed to bear good fruit.

Taking this advantage, the leaders of APC converged in Sokoto (one of the “New PDP”- controlled states) ostensibly for the inauguration of the Sokoto State University. The key item on the agenda however had nothing to do with tertiary education; the focus was the consolidation of APC as a mega party that was capable of displacing the PDP from power. Following the Sokoto event, a delegation of the APC visited the “G7 governors” (governors that formed the New PDP) and extended formal invitations for them to dump PDP and team up with the forthcoming mega party.

Apparently, running out of public sympathy and, perhaps also credibility, the New PDP leaders took the bull by the horn on 26th November, 2013 as they formalized their defections to the APC. After a meeting with the APC leaders, chairman of the New PDP, Abubakar Baraje, read a communiqué. The two sentence communiqué said: “Leadership of APC and New PDP met this morning at the residence of Kano State Governor, Rabi’u Kwankwaso in Abuja. After an exhaustive deliberation, the two parties agreed to merge in order to rescue our fledgling democracy and the nation” (Aruna, 2013).

Barely three weeks after the defection of five governors and other “New PDP” members, 37 members of the House of Representatives declared their defection to the All Progressives Congress (APC). In a joint letter written by the 37 members which was read at the plenary on 18th December, 2013 by Speaker Aminu Waziri Tambuwal; 37 members dumped the PDP as a result of the crisis that has engulfed the party in recent times, citing relevant sections of the constitution which give them the mandate to do so. Few weeks after the defection of the 37 House of Representatives, 11 senators elected on the platform of PDP also defected to APC on 29th January, 2014. Amazingly, two days after 11 senators defected, former vice president and a founding member of PDP, Atiku

Abubakar, defected from PDP to APC on 2nd February, 2014. He also directed all his supporters and loyalists in the Peoples Democratic Movement (PDM) and other parties or associations to register with the APC.

Moreover, as the euphoria of celebrations enveloped the APC following the big catch of 5 governors, 37 reps, 11 senators, and ex-vice president Atiku Abubakar, Speaker of the house of reps Aminu Tambuwal dumped the PDP for APC and former President Obasanjo, who had already publicly undermined Jonathan, publicly tore up his PDP party card in front of journalists in his home just weeks before the polls. This wave of massive defections, among other factors, seriously affected the PDP in the 2015 presidential election (Owen and Usman, 2015). At the end of the process, APC polled 53.96 percent of total votes cast, while PDP polled 44.96 percent. Not only did Nigeria conduct its most credible and transparent elections since independence with minimal violence but, for the first time in the country's history, an opposition party – (APC) – defeated an entrenched ruling party (PDP). The peaceful and credible conduct of these polls set Nigeria on a trajectory towards consolidating its democracy, transitioning from a largely unstable and expedient experiment in 1999 to the realm of political maturity.

CONCLUSION

It is commonly held that beyond government, the existence of credible, strong and challenging opposition is important for the consolidation of democracy. Since its emergence, the APC has been unsparingly critical of the PDP and the Jonathan administration, seizing every opportunity to portray the party and Jonathan as woeful failures, particularly in their management of national security and the economy. In response to APC's campaign, PDP devised a multidimensional campaign that employed not only the traditional methods such as campaign rallies and town-hall meetings, but also TV and newspaper advertorials, Facebook, Twitter and other social media to engage with younger voters (Owen and Usman, 2015). Although inflammatory language is common in Nigerian Electioneering campaign, as the 2015 Election campaigns progressed, the PDP's messaging quality deteriorated, becoming increasingly divisive in ethnic and religious terms, and focusing on personality attacks against key opposition members rather than policy messages. As a result of this, the 2015 general elections were fiercer than most, with expectations from the apostles of doom that they would end in a contentious stalemate, and engulf the country in violent political crisis that may even announce the obituary of the Nigerian state. However, the actual conduct of the elections defied expectations. Not only did Nigeria conduct its most credible election with minimal violence but, for the first time in the country's history, an

opposition party – (APC) – defeated an entrenched ruling party (PDP). The credible conduct of these polls and the altercation of power from PDP to APC at the center have set Nigeria on a trajectory towards consolidating its democracy, transitioning from a largely unstable and expedient experiment in 1999 to the realm of political maturity.

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