

Nigeria: Political Parties' Limitations

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An important venue for Nigerian politics since the 1999 restoration of civilian government, which followed a generation of military rule, has been the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). While there have always been numerous political parties, the PDP is the place where the competing and cooperating elites that dominate Nigeria have been most comfortable operating. Former president Olusegun Obasanjo liked to say that the PDP was the largest political party in Africa. After he left presidential office, he tried with limited success to shape or influence events from his position as chairman of the PDP Board of Trustees.

Political parties, especially the PDP, are almost entirely instruments of elite politics with little resonance at the grass-roots level. They do not address the issues of religion, ethnicity, and region that increasingly mobilize the Nigerian "street." The PDP, therefore, has only a most superficial resemblance to political parties in, for example, the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom. Like Nigeria's other political parties, the PDP is driven by personality rather than policy, and money has always played a role in determining individual political alliances. The PDP, and the other parties, cannot be characterized as being on the "left" or the "right." These terms have little meaning in Nigeria. It is also a long standing tradition that parties are not based on religion, ethnicity, or region; there is no Muslim or Christian party. There is in Nigeria no equivalent to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party.

This system may be changing however. Since Goodluck Jonathan's 2011 election as president, the elites have fractured. Accordingly, so too has the PDP. Elites who oppose Jonathan's government for a variety of reasons have withdrawn from the

PDP and organized themselves into the All Progressives Congress (APC), itself a union of various earlier opposition groups. Five formerly PDP governors and numerous former PDP legislators have joined the APC.

However, some who left the PDP for the APC have already returned to the fold, and in the remaining months before the 2015 elections, we can expect individuals to move between the two parties based on their calculations of their personal interests. Nevertheless, it is widely anticipated that the elections of 2015 will be a two-horse race, rather than the process of the previous three elections, which better resembled an anointing of the PDP candidate who had been chosen by something approaching elite consensus.

Some of Nigeria's friends have welcomed the emergence of the APC as opening up the political process by breaking the PDP monopoly on power. And, that is true, presuming the APC holds together through the elections.

However, many perhaps most of the politicians in the APC were once in the PDP. They are elites practicing elite politics with little reference to the Nigerian people. Hence, in the short term at least, it would be unrealistic to expect that politicians will approach governance in a divergent way from when they were in the PDP. The fracturing of Nigeria's elites has resulted in two elite political parties, the PDP and the APC. The APC is not the harbinger of a Nigerian version of the "Arab Spring."