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PEOPLES' DEMOCRATIC PARTY AND SELECTION OF GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE IN NORTH-WEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study offers an in-depth, qualitative examination of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) gubernatorial candidate selection process in Northwestern Nigeria, with the aim of understanding the underlying political dynamics and their impact on the party's electoral performance. Utilizing a qualitative paper design, the study focused on interpreting the complex, internal political culture that shaped candidate selection, arguing that the process was a key determinant of the party's significant defeat in the 2015 general election. The methodological approach centered on gaining rich, contextual insights from those directly involved in the selection process. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 party executives in the North-Western geopolitical zone, allowing for a deep exploration of their perceptions, motivations, and experiences. The interview protocol used a set of 10 structured questions to guide the conversations, ensuring thematic consistency while allowing for the emergence of new, relevant details. The resulting interview transcripts and relevant party documents were analyzed using thematic and documentary methods. This qualitative analysis uncovered several critical themes that permeated the selection process. The findings highlight the significant influence of internal party politics on candidate selection, revealing a process fraught with problems despite adherence to formal rules. Key themes that emerged from the interviews included the pervasive influence of party executives, the strategic use of incumbency power by serving PDP governors, and the destabilizing impact of internal party factions. Furthermore, the analysis illuminated the significant role played by wealthy party benefactors and the persistent presence of ethno-religious sentiments in shaping selection outcomes. These factors frequently inflicted factionalism among party members, which negatively impacted the quality of candidates. Ultimately, the executives' narrative suggests a strong link between the perceived lack of credibility in the 2014 gubernatorial candidate selection process and the party's subsequent electoral failure in 2015. The study concludes that internal factionalism, member defection, and electoral defeat were direct consequences of the PDP's flawed political culture in the North-Western geopolitical zone.

Keywords: Political Party, Candidate Selection, Elite Influence, Internal Party Democracy, Factionalism

Introduction

Political parties are central to modern democracy. Scholars have long contended that meaningful political parties are necessary for a thriving democratic system. LaPalombara and Weiner (1966) argued that they are creatures of modern and modernizing political systems. In any political system, be it democratic or totalitarian, the political party in whatever form is far-reaching. They provide policy platforms through which candidates aspiring for political positions contest elections in a competitive democracy. Hazan and Rahat (2010) are of the opinion that candidate selection is among the foremost programs every political party carries out

before participating in a general election. It is believed that candidate selection has significant consequences for a political party in the end. The lack of openness and equity in the manner party candidates are selected can breed internal disputes and, crucially, affect the party's possibility of electoral success. Omoruyi (1998) maintained that political parties are seen as mechanisms that bring about desired changes or pave the way for a transition from one-party rule to a highly diverse and competitive political system. This is possible when internal party contests among aspirants adhere to democratic standards, reflected in how parties make their candidate selections.

This study examines candidate selection within the guiding principles of political parties in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. As a prelude to the military government handing over power to a democratically elected government in Nigeria in 1999, political parties were registered to compete for elective offices in the 1999 general election. As a developing democracy, there were only three political associations that met all the stipulated legal requirements and were given approval and registered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) after the local government elections. The Political parties, All Nigerian Peoples' Party (APP), Alliance for Democracy (AD), and Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), were formed in such a way that mistakes of the past, where ethnic and religious sentiments were prevalent, could be avoided. However, the dynamics and character of these parties fell short of expectations. Scholars like Kura (2014) opined that political parties at the beginning of the Fourth Republic exhibited sectional sentiments except for the PDP. This is because it had a greater national spread in structure and outlook. This may have contributed to the party's effective control of the political system at all levels, allowing it to remain the government party at the national level until 2015. The outcome of federal and state elections from 1999 to 2011 indicated that the PDP was consistently ahead of other political parties with a wide margin, as much as 60% in 1999 and 70% in 2011. However, in the 2015 general elections, the PDP suffered a heavy defeat across the country for the first time in Nigeria's democratic history. INEC results showed that at the presidential election, the margin was 66% in favor of the opposition All Progressive Congress (APC), and the PDP had only 34%.

Statement of the Problem

Selecting candidates is a key role for political parties in democracies around the world. Yet, its importance is often overlooked in Paper, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, where political institutions are still fragile. This study looks at the gap between the official rules for choosing candidates and what actually happens in practice within Nigerian parties. While many agree that fair and open selection is vital for a party's

democratic image and success in elections, party leaders often influence the process to favor certain candidates. This undermines internal democracy, leading to divisions and factions that hurt the party's chances in elections. These practices also make it harder for democracy to take root more broadly.

The People's Democratic Party (PDP), a dominant force in Nigeria's Fourth Republic until its 2015 defeat, serves as a compelling case study. Its unexpected loss, following a period of sustained power, necessitates a focused investigation into the internal dynamics of its candidate selection process. Specifically, this study aims to understand how the PDP selected its gubernatorial candidates in the North-Western states and to identify the factors that demonstrably impacted this process, ultimately contributing to the party's electoral decline in the 2015 general elections.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Elite Theory of political behavior, complemented by insights from the Group Theory. Elite Theory, primarily associated with thinkers like Mosca (1896), Pareto (1902), and Michels (1911), posits that in any society, a small, organized minority, or elite, inevitably governs the unorganized majority. Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" specifically argues that even within seemingly democratic organizations like political parties, power tends to concentrate in the hands of a few leaders. This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing candidate selection processes, especially in contexts like Nigeria, where resources, connections, and personal influence often supersede formal rules. The theory helps explain how a select group of party executives, powerful governors, and wealthy benefactors can dominate decision-making, including the crucial choice of candidates, despite democratic rhetoric or procedures.

The Group Theory, as described by scholars such as David Truman (1951), further enriches this understanding by focusing on how various groups within a political system compete for influence. In the context of candidate selection, this theory helps explain the formation and impact of internal party factions vying for control over the nomination process. It allows for an

analysis of how different factions, driven by varying interests, including ethnic and religious considerations, coalesce and exert pressure on the selection mechanism. The findings of this Paper, revealing the significant influence of party executives, incumbent governors, party benefactors, and ethno-religious sentiments, align strongly with the propositions of both Elite Theory and Group Theory. These frameworks collectively explain the oligarchic nature of candidate selection within the PDP and the subsequent internal conflicts and electoral setbacks.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to provide an in-depth understanding of the PDP's gubernatorial candidate selection process in North-Western Nigeria. This approach allowed for an exploration of the complex socio-political dynamics and the rich contextual details that shaped the outcomes. According to Creswell (2014), a qualitative approach is ideal for exploring a phenomenon within its natural setting and for understanding the experiences and perceptions of participants. Breman (2013) also emphasizes that qualitative methods are crucial for capturing the nuances and complexities of political processes that quantitative data might miss. Newman (2011) highlights the interpretive nature of qualitative research, allowing participants to delve into the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences.

The population comprised individuals directly involved in the selection process, specifically focusing on party executives at the state level within the North-Western geopolitical zone. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select 15 key party executives for in-depth interviews. This approach was chosen to ensure that the participants possessed firsthand knowledge and rich insights into the candidate selection dynamics. Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative research when the goal is to select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002, cited by Creswell, 2014). The small sample size is characteristic of qualitative studies, prioritizing depth over breadth (Mason, 2010).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary method for data collection. These interviews allowed for flexibility in probing participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of events while maintaining a consistent focus on the Paper questions. A structured interview guide comprising 10 open-ended questions ensured that core themes were covered consistently across all interviews. In addition to interviews, documentary analysis was conducted, examining party rules, internal memoranda, and reports related to the primaries during the period under study. This method, as advocated by Bowen (2009), provides contextual information and triangulates data obtained through interviews. The collected data, including transcribed interviews and analyzed documents, were subjected to thematic analysis. This involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis, a widely recognized approach in qualitative research, facilitates the systematic organization and interpretation of rich textual data (Creswell, 2014). The process involved transcribing interviews verbatim, reading and re-reading the data for familiarity, coding relevant segments, generating initial themes, reviewing and refining themes, and finally presenting the findings.

Discussion of Findings

Interviews with party executives in Nigeria's North-Western states revealed the complex and often challenging nature of the PDP's process for choosing gubernatorial candidates. Several main themes emerged that help explain what influenced these selections and how they affected the party's results in the 2015 election.

Firstly, the study found a pervasive influence of party executives in shaping the selection process. This aligns with the tenets of Elite Theory, where a core group within the party exerts control over critical decisions. Executives' narratives revealed how their opinions and endorsements carried significant weight, often overriding the preferences of the broader party membership. This observation resonates with the arguments by scholars like Ikeanyibe (2014), who noted the oligarchic nature of Nigerian primary elections and

the tendency for party leaders to disregard internal democratic principles.

Secondly, the strategic deployment of incumbency power by serving PDP governors emerged as a critical factor. Governors, leveraging their control over party structures and resources, actively manipulated the process to install their preferred successors or secure their own re-nomination. This finding reinforces the notion of self-interest in political behavior and the instrumental use of power within party structures, a concept explored by scholars examining political behavior and funding in Nigeria.

Thirdly, the Paper highlighted the significant and often destabilizing impact of internal party factions. These factions, often coalescing around powerful individuals or groups, intensely competed for control over the nomination process. The resulting infighting, as described by the executives, often overshadowed any adherence to formal party rules or democratic procedures. This aligns with Group Theory, which emphasizes competition between groups for political influence, and mirrors the "intra-elite factionalism" identified by Ashindorbe and Danjibo (2019).

Furthermore, the study illuminated the deep relevance of party benefactors in the gubernatorial candidates' selection. These wealthy individuals provided crucial financial support but, in return, wielded significant influence, often dictating candidate choices. This dynamic reinforces the findings of studies on political party funding in Nigeria, highlighting the dominance of private financing and the culture of dependency and clientelism it fosters.

Crucially, ethno-religious sentiment was identified as a potent factor. Executives discussed how ethnicity and religion played a role in rallying support for specific candidates or in opposing others, contributing to factionalism. The intersection of party benefactors' interests and ethno-religious considerations was found to exacerbate divisions, creating and deepening factions among party members. This observation underscores the complex interplay of cultural, economic, and political factors in Nigeria's candidate selection process.

The cumulative effect of these factors was a perceived decline in the quality of candidates emerging from the process, especially in the 2014 primaries compared to 2011. The executives' narratives consistently suggested that the factionalized, top-down approach prioritized loyalty and financial backing over competence and popular appeal. This lack of credibility in the selection process fostered resentment and defections among aggrieved party members, creating a strong negative relationship between the selection process and electoral success. This finding resonates with the argument that internal party democracy, or its absence, significantly impacts electoral outcomes. The executives' consensus pointed to the flawed 2014 primary elections as a direct contributor to the PDP's defeat in the 2015 general elections in the North-Western zone.

Conclusion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP)'s gubernatorial candidate selection process in Nigeria's North-Western states, revealing a complex interplay of political, economic, and socio-cultural factors that critically undermined its integrity. The Paper confirms that despite the formal adherence to party rules, the selection process was significantly influenced by the elite dynamics within the party, including the pervasive power of party executives, the strategic use of incumbency by governors, the impact of internal factions, and the substantial role played by wealthy benefactors. Moreover, ethno-religious sentiments were found to be potent forces, exacerbating divisions and contributing to factionalism. The study concludes that these internal party politics, characterized by a lack of transparency and fairness, directly impacted the quality of candidates selected and fostered widespread internal conflicts, ultimately leading to party member defections, entrenched factionalism, and the PDP's electoral failure in the North-Western geopolitical zone in the 2015 general election. The findings underscore a clear link between a flawed internal candidate selection process and broader electoral outcomes in Nigeria's emerging democracy.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study on the PDP's gubernatorial candidate selection process in North-Western Nigeria, the following recommendations are put forward to foster more credible and democratic selection processes in political parties, particularly in emerging democracies like Nigeria:

Strengthen Internal Party Democracy: Political parties, including the PDP, must prioritize genuine internal democracy by ensuring greater transparency and equity in candidate selection. This requires adhering strictly to party constitutions and electoral guidelines, rather than allowing elite manipulation or informal networks to dictate outcomes.

Curb Undue Influence of Party Executives and Incumbents: Mechanisms should be established to reduce the disproportionate influence of party executives and incumbent officeholders. This could include stricter enforcement of party rules, independent oversight of primaries, and penalties for those who subvert democratic procedures.

Regulate Party Financing and Reduce Benefactor Influence: There is a need for robust regulatory frameworks to ensure transparency and accountability in party funding. This should aim to reduce the reliance on wealthy benefactors, thereby limiting their ability to impose candidates and promoting greater independence within the party structure.

Mitigate Factionalism through Inclusive Processes: Parties should actively work to foster internal unity and inclusivity by addressing the root causes of factionalism. This involves creating platforms for open dialogue, equitable access to opportunities within the party, and mechanisms for resolving disputes fairly. Policies that explicitly discourage the exploitation of ethno-religious sentiments for political gain should be developed and enforced.

Prioritize Candidate Quality and Credibility: The selection process must prioritize the emergence of qualified and credible candidates who possess the competence and integrity to serve effectively. This requires a shift away from patronage-based selections towards merit-based processes that genuinely reflect the will of the party members and the electorate.

Enhance Political Education and Member Participation: Investing in political education for party members and the broader electorate can empower individuals to demand more transparent and democratic processes. Increased civic awareness can encourage greater participation and hold parties accountable for their candidate selection choices.

These recommendations aim to foster a more robust and democratic candidate selection environment, ultimately strengthening political parties and contributing to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

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