

# **Internal Party Discipline and Commitment to Democracy**

By

Yakubu Aboki Ochefu PhD

National President, Historical Society of Nigeria

## **Introduction**

This paper interrogates the role of Internal Party Discipline and the commitment to democracy. We proceed first by establishing the philosophical and historical context under which order and discipline defines the framework for development of society. We then outline the nature and character of political parties and how discipline plays a critical role in the realisation of political goals. By looking specifically at the role of intra-political crisis we show how internal house keeping issues can easily degenerate to major political conflagrations that can impede the growth of emerging and existing democracies.

## **Background**

It is now common to refer to the world that we live in as a knowledge driven one. As a historian I know that this is the third time in the history of mankind that the role of knowledge has become extremely critical to the development of nations and its peoples. Ma'at in ancient Khemet and the Renaissance in Western Europe are the first two. Each time that this has happened, mankind is transformed in several fundamental ways with far reaching implications. When it first occurred nearly 3000 years ago, the philosophical roots of our modern world view was laid. From the concept of the creation of mankind and one supreme God, to written language, principles of mathematics, geometry, medicine [K]chemistry and the codification of teaching and

learning, ancient Khemet or Egypt as it is more popularly known gave the world its first knowledge based civilisation.

It is generally agreed that the renaissance laid the foundation for emergence of modern Europe. By assembling philosophies borrowed from Africa, Islamic Arabia, India and China, Europe was able to chart a course that would see it dominate the entire world less than five hundred years after its "dark age". The close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has ushered in yet another knowledge age which is perhaps more profound than the earliest two. I will not bore you with any details. You are all living witnesses to the array of technology that is daily shaping our lives.

For knowledge to triumph and become useful for the transformation of society, order, discipline and patience must prevail. From philosophy we know that the codification of knowledge emerges from rational and logical thought processes which may be arrived at from randomised observation/behaviour, experimentation and practice. An iron law of logic is order and discipline. Similarly from pedagogy we know that, patience is a *sin-qua non*. The concept of learned behaviour is firmly rooted on patience. This is why time and sequencing exists in any thought and learning flow process.

I have given this background to underscore the integral relationship between order, discipline and patience in human existence and endeavour. Let me now proceed to relate this to politics and democracy to enable us draw some conclusions.

### **Political Parties, Discipline and the Commitment to Democracy.**

It is important to clearly understand what political parties are and how they equate or relate to democracy. This is so because it is easy to erroneously believe that political parties and democracy are synonymous. A political party is an organised group of citizens or interests who aggregate similar political views and work to capture control of government in order to translate these

views into public policy. Sigmund Neumann (1977) also defines a political party as *"the organisation of society's active political agents, those who are concerned with the control of governmental power and who compete for popular support with another group or groups holding divergent views."* A clear distinction exists between interest groups and political parties. The former operates largely as pressure groups who try to influence which policies are chosen without actually bidding for power or setting policies. Parties however, have as their central purpose the acquisition of power and the direction of policy. Thus a political party is a vehicle for expressing choice and also a channel for the use of power. Political parties mobilize the masses both as members of the electorate and as specific party members. They recruit and socialise political leaders. They are a source of political identity for their members and supporters and a channel of control, mobilisation, communication. Parties more importantly provide guidelines and codes of conduct for individual members. These provide for the rights, obligations and responsibilities of members.

Political Scientists often use the term party discipline to mean the extent to which parties and their leaders mandate their members to follow a decision of the party. This may range from election of officials or adoption of particular policies. "Toeing the party line" as it is often called can be an extremely balancing act given the nature and character of the party itself. Distinctions exist between individuals who commit fully to the party and those whose loyalty may lie with the citizens or their personal interests. There is also the matter of political rhetoric vis-à-vis reality. Here we refer to the ability of the party to ensure ex-post adherence to pre-announced positions usually made during the campaigns. The reality of the situation is that once elected or appointed to political office, individual interest and or views (which may be parochial) can more often than not, clash with the broad ideological agenda of the party. This is especially true where local realities at the constituency level contradict very sharply with goals and ideals at the national levels.

Let us pose a few questions in order to ponder in some detail on three core issues that often challenge the ability of political parties to manage its internal order. These are; Emergence of party officials and electoral flag bearers, adoption of public policy and fundraising and management of funds.

### **Emergence of Party Officials and Electoral Flag bearers.**

This refers to the process for determining both the party's leadership and officials as well as the candidates for public office. Against the backdrop of the formation of the party, its ideological orientation, history and legacy how does this take place?

How are leaders and officials of the party selected? By election? By appointment? Are local party leaders and officials pre-determined?

- Do party leaders have ultimate veto power? Are there measures of selecting candidates that reduce opportunities for corruption and manipulation?
- Do all members vote on the selection of candidates or does a committee decide?
- Are members of the public consulted before candidates for public office are decided?
- Do branch offices choose the candidate from their areas? Do marginal groups such as women, youths, and physically challenged persons feature in the selection process?
- How does the party deal with problems encountered in the selection process of both candidates and leaders such as vote buying, bribery of electoral committees, cronyism, opportunism and patronage?
- Once appointed and elected do procedural mechanisms exist to ensure commitment to party ideology and objectives?

As we reflect over these questions we assume that all the parties lay claims to being democratic or concede to operating in a democratic sphere. In theocracies or monarchies, our answers will definitely be different.

### **Adoption of Public Policy.**

How do parties formulate and agree on public policy? Given that this the product which is ultimately sold to the electorate, the processes that ensure the emergence of policies and their implementation can make or mar a party.

- Are policies formulated using rigorous analytical methods or figments of the moods of the leadership?
- Are the opinions of various interest groups within the polity sought and sampled?
- Are policies modeled against the possible reaction of the political opposition and or the wider electorate?
- To what extent do individual law makers or appointed officials believe in these policies? Where such polices offend their individual ideological convictions what happens ?
- What are the mechanisms for recall and or realignment of public policies that seem to be counterproductive to the party's electoral fortunes?
- How do parties manage pre-election promises and rhetoric with post election realities?

### **Fundraising and Management of Funds.**

Here we refer to the way in which parties raise funds and manage them. The pertinent questions include;

- Are there specific fundraising guidelines? Who manages fundraising for the party?
- Do party members have to report all the funds they raise?
- Should parties place any restrictions on donors to the party? Are there sources of funding parties should reject? How can parties monitor for contributions from "dark sources"?
- Do parties use fundraising tactics that limit opportunities for corruption? How do parties handle contributions going directly to the candidates?
- In cases where funds are given to candidates, do parties have any particular policies to monitor and keep track of such exchanges?

- How can parties protect the privacy of their donors despite public demands for greater transparency?
- Are their institutional mechanisms to regulate how the ruling parties in particular raise its funds?
- Should professional accountants manage party funds?
- Should party financial records be made available to all members of the party? To the public? To any particular government monitoring agency?
- Should there be external audits of party accounts?
- How should party funds be controlled? Who should have authorization over bank accounts?
- Are greater checks on financial management advantageous?

As we ponder over these questions it is easy to see how difficult it is to maintain order and discipline in a party. In providing answers to these questions it should become clear how and why cliques, camps, rebel wings and breakaway factions are a common feature of political parties.

### **Intra-Party Conflicts**

Intra-party conflicts refers to a sustained level of disagreements amongst the formal and informal leadership of a political party whereby the content for control is seen as a zero sum game in which one side must win. It is often characterized by breakdown of controls and discipline as members and even leaders take sharply divergent positions on core matters of the party. At the heart of each intra- party crisis, are the allegations of marginalisation, oppression, unfairness, and arbitrariness. These are all symptoms that the rule of law and procedure within the party which are necessary to ensure that the ultimate goals of politics namely service for the common good of the public has disappeared, and has been replaced by self seeking interests. As we noted in an earlier paper, political pathologies are rife in emerging democracies especially those of our sub-region. I stated that:

For many of them (i.e. political leaders) capture of state power is a matter of life and death. There is only one election and if that is lost, the entire process and indeed country can burn. If they win, because they do not have faith in the process (and for many in the country they run), they commoditize state power and use it for private purposes.

This pathological context has its origins within the parties in the first instance. As they emerge and trigger crises internally a trail of such crises pervades the entire landscape, causing instability and breakdown of law and order. When we critically analyses the demise of virtual all the governments of the first republics in the sub-region after independence, intra-political feuds always featured as the major cause. The lesson here is that if the promoters of democracy are themselves not democratic, how do they intend to use democracy as a platform to develop the society? If they do not possess the discipline and order that is inherent in democratic enterprise how do they propose to use state power to transform society? And if they do not have the patience to learn and observe the fundamentals of political behavior and culture, how can they logically practice it?

## **Conclusions**

According to our ancestors who founded the great civilizations of Kush, Nubia and Khemet, "words have power". That is why African elders do not invoke and make pronouncements on individuals or situations casually. As we confront the challenges of modern civilization and the inherent development imperatives, we must look deeper into our traditional cultures to seek out values that are unique and (natural) to us while borrowing systematically from other civilizations in the world. This is how Europe built its great civilization. The Chinese and Indians have also done same. Indian democracy infuses elements of Hinduism with western democratic ideals. So also is modern China which has insisted on democracy Chinese style. Wholesale

importation of foreign ideas and values will always create a disconnect that causes the type of problems we see with our parties.

Political party leaders in the region and indeed the continent cannot pretend that our cultures do not provide deep reservoirs from which we can answer the questions that were posed above? By aligning the answers to questions such as how to appoint our leaders, manage funds, discipline recalcitrant members e.g. to our traditional context, we will be ensuring that our democratic practice is in tune with our natural setting. For example many Nigerian communities, have applied the traditional concept of "chop and give your brother" (or principles of rotation) to reduce considerably the contest for power especially at the local level.

In addition to using aspects of our culture as a tool for strengthening our democracy, we also advocate greater involvement of women in politics and political office. It is increasingly becoming clear to political elites across the continent that our women are probably better managers of resources than men. This should come as no surprise because the African woman is a versatile, hardworking, dedicated and committed member of her household and community. More importantly she has had to bear (and still bear) the brunt of the excesses of the men folk. Thus when given leadership positions the tendency for most African women to perform better than her male counterparts is high. The male chauvinists views which pervade on how we see our women re being broken down by empirical evidence from the performance of women in public and community service. Indeed psychologists argue that while the male ego has the capacity to distort rational thinking in men, women have a stronger will and instinct to survive. As a man myself I believe that this is true.

Thirdly is the use of impartial arbiters. Again we make recourse to our traditions. In most African cultures impartial arbiters (who are more often than not external to the community) exists across the board. When disputes arise the actors seek them and usually agree to abide by their decisions. Our



modern day political actors (or gladiators depending on your view of them) would rather use brawn or underhand tactics to resolve internal issues. This is hardly surprising as opportunism and self interest is often behind the cause of the crisis in the first instance. We counsel that political parties should consider resolving internal differences through the court of public opinion rather than engage in bloody struggles for control and or domination.

A fourth intervention is the regular audit of parties. Here we refer to a democratic audit that checks the health and performance of the party, its leadership, organizational and membership structure, appeal to the electorate, relevance of its core vision and directing policies and its electoral fortunes. By engaging experts from the academia, NGO's and professional groups such audit will provide as a sort of "well man test result" which the party can use to either maintain or improve its leadership position within the polity.

An American President once noted that politicians do not lie but only say things that are not true. Here we must confront ourselves with the truth. The political leadership of any party must be very disciplined and continuously engaged with its electorate. Tolerance, cooperation, commitment and above all a strong political will are critical components of politics. The culture of sustainable politics must permeate the political landscape unlike the culture of subsistence politics that we have today. A clear vision backed by a strong legal framework and implemented by a disciplined and strong willed leadership that continuously consults its people on its policies, will most certainly produce tangible and long lasting developmental results that are people desperately need.