

Putting Government on Its Toes: A Vociferous Opposition Party and the Lai Mohammed Phenomenon in Nigeria's Electoral Politics

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt to x-ray the role of the opposition parties in Nigeria, particularly since the advent of the current democratic rule in 1999. This is essentially pigeonholed from the lens of a personality that has shaped the face of opposition politics in the nation's political history. Is Lai Mohammed a pathological agent of propaganda just to facilitate the process of grabbing power or a driver of change for vision-enhanced governance? How has his intervention as opposition spokesperson altered the political landscape of the country? Was the intervention a mere antagonism or patriotic timely engagement? Considering the outcome of the 2015 general elections, did Nigerian electorate really buy into that intervention or only responded to regime fatigue? Or was the process (peaceful transfer of power from the ruling party to the opposition) enhanced by the liberal disposition of the previous administration? Drawing extensively from secondary sources with the aid of descriptive and narrative tools, this essay seeks to provide answers to these posers while it concludes that the democratization process must move beyond transfer of power from one party to the other and address such issues as civil liberties, human dignity, the rule of law and good governance.

Key Words: Opposition Party, Electoral Politics, Government, Personality, Democracy

Introduction

At the beginning of this 21st century, the mode of managing affairs of the State chosen by a great majority of countries on the planet is democracy. Whether it is the direct form practised in the city-states of ancient Greece or its current representative form, citizens have always resorted to elections to implement democracy (Hounkpe and Gueye, 2010:9). However, it is globally agreed that democracy is not an event, but a journey. And that the destination of that journey is

democratic consolidation – that state where democracy has become so rooted and so routine and widely accepted by all actors (Buhari, 2015). Many newly established democracies suffer from weak political parties, to a point where there has been a return to *de facto* one party system. The increasing acuteness of the problem points to a weakness with the political party as an institution (IDEA, 2001:1). Without a minimally institutionalized party system, vertical and horizontal accountability is difficult if not impossible. In order to provide the necessary aggregation of interests, channeling of conflicts and predictability in politics, political parties need to be institutionalized (van Eerd, 2014:9).

The essence of electoral competition is that political parties compete for power through the public vote, and are expected to comply with the rules of the electoral game. So, political parties enter into complex relations with each other, competing to overtake each other or forming alliances. Through negotiations and debates, political parties engage each other (UNECA, 2013:143). It has been proven that mass democracy can only function in the form of representative democracy and that the parties are in the end the only institutions that are legitimated by their participation in general elections, justifying their representation and legitimacy through their participation in these elections (Hofmeister and Grabow, 2011:63). Today, there is a dramatic transformation in the world politics through the spread of democracy. In fact, international organizations and states are intruding on sovereignty in various and bold ways for the sake of promoting democracy and freedom (Iseghohime, 2009:13). Elections are therefore, seen as the most striking manifestation of the sovereignty of the people, who would feel cheated if the value of their vote were distorted or negated by an unfair electoral system.

Every transition to new leadership implies change, and hence a challenge to political stability. Democracies minimize this challenge by holding regular and competitive elections that open genuine opportunities for emerging new leaders and through transparent power transfers that help winners and losers accept their fates. Claude Ake (1996) once observed that, in the hurry to globalise democracy in the aftermath of the ending of the Cold War, democracy was reduced to the crude simplicity of multiparty elections to the benefit of some of the world's most notorious autocrats who were able to parade democratic credentials without reforming their repressive regimes. In Africa, elections provide a theatre of power politics amongst elites. Such moments lay bare elites' desperation to hang on to power for incumbents, or achieve power for marginal elites.

For incumbents, state resources and other privileges associated with state power are invested in retaining power. And for those wanting to gain power, personal wealth and those of “power brokers” are patronised to fight their way into power (Tar and Shettima, 2010:139).

Nigeria’s experience over the years underscores the salience of the state in the perpetuation of undemocratic rule. This leads to the conclusion that any move toward democracy and its consolidation must involve an initial and crucial step of reconstructing the state itself (IDEA, 2001:138). The country has not known five continuous years of democratic rule since it came into being in 1914 (ibid). The process of holding elections as a peaceful and orderly means of power transfer has been problematic. Thus, current experiment with democracy which began in 1999 is the longest the country has had since its 55-year history. Not only is it the longest, it is also the first time that elections have been successfully organized by civilian regimes not only to mark the transfer of power from one government to another (Aaron, 2012:9) but from a ruling party to the opposition as witnessed in the 2015 elections. The recent electoral season, therefore, marked an important departure from the familiar trajectory of politics in the country. Departing from Nigeria’s history of flawed elections and oligarchic control, the 2015 balloting offered a broadly credible and competitive exercise across most of the country (Lewis, 2011:60).

This brings us to the relevance of opposition party in a democracy; how it has redefined electoral politics in Nigeria will be discussed in subsequent sections. Opposition is characterised as an essential ingredient and a desirable spice for a decent democratic government. The mostly easily conceived and discussed types of opposition are the elements or parties that challenge the ruling party or at best put it “on its toes” (Adesola and Akinyemi, 2014:141). The relevance of opposition party is embedded in western style of party competition between political parties. It is regarded in the West as the most useful practical mode of producing stability in the absence of friction among the organs in a political system for a long period (Adeola, 2014:62). In democratic countries, opposition parties are free to criticise the ruling party and the government. They are entrusted with offering policy alternatives (Dolo, 1988).

In a clearly defined political system, opposition parties are believed to play an inexcusably critical role in shaping policy agenda, conducting civic education and checkmating corruption, often times in collaboration with the media. By their roles, they are faced with the need to correct

such moves that constrain the democratisation of the nation building process (Oyeyipo, 2013). Essentially, opposition party denotes an organised partisan movement dedicated to opposing and possibly replacing an incumbent government. However, it should be noted that no political party is formed to serve as opposition. A party becomes an opposition when it loses an election.

It is posited that elections in Africa present the government in power with two options: allow the electoral process to function as intended - fairly, impartially and objectively, and accept the peoples' verdict by allowing the results of elections to reflect their preferences and choices, or "slam the door shut" by negating the peoples' choice by skewing and manipulating the process to retain power (Oko, 2009:13). Nigerian politics is often played out as zero sum game where anything other than a seat at the main table is not considered worthwhile (africappractice, 2015:2). As such, the politicians have over the years "become more desperate and daring in taking and retaining power; more reckless and greedy in their use and abuse of power; and more intolerant of opposition, criticism and efforts at replacing them" (Electoral Reform Committee Report, 2008, Vol. 1: 19). For the ruling party, electoral fraud represents part of a more general scheme to erode the concept of accountability and govern without feeling constrained by public opinion and the prospects of losing elections (Oko, 2009:10).

It is in this context that the relative success of the Nigeria's 2015 elections justifies the argument by Staffan Lindberg (2006:145) that the repeated holding of elections, even if they are not fully free and fair, promotes democratization. This essay is therefore, an attempt to x-ray the role of the opposition party in Nigeria, particularly since the advent of the current democratic rule in 1999. This is essentially pigeonholed from the lens of a personality that has shaped the face of opposition in the nation's political history. Is Lai Mohammed a pathological agent of propaganda just to grab power or driver of change for vision-enhanced governance? How has his intervention as opposition spokesperson altered the political landscape of the country? Was the intervention a mere antagonism or patriotic timely engagement? Did Nigerian electorate really buy into that intervention or only responded to regime fatigue? Drawing extensively from secondary sources with the aid of descriptive and narrative tools, this essay seeks to critically engage these questions more so that "the lack of regime turnover through elections needs to be analysed further from the perspective of opposition parties and coalitions, and their prospects for institutionalization and consolidation" (IDEA, 2007:130).

Democracy and Opposition Parties in Nigeria: A Theoretical Insight

By any measure, political parties--defined as distinctive organisations whose principal aim is to acquire and exercise political power, that is, gain control of governmental apparatus--are undoubtedly a dominant feature of contemporary organised political systems. Originating in their modern form in Europe and the United States in the 19th century, political parties, as formal organisations, have spread and become ubiquitous throughout the world. And they currently play a multiplicity of vital, indeed indispensable, roles in political systems, especially so in regards to democratic governance (Ndulo, 2001:247). While democracy rests on the informed and active participation of the people, political parties are viable tools in this regard. Democracy exists where the foremost leaders of a political system are selected by competitive elections in which the bulk of the population has the opportunity to participate. Evidently, the condition of the parties, in a political system, is the best possible evidence of the nature of any democratic regime (Anifowose, 2004:59).

In the last two decades, democracy has grown strong roots in Africa. Elections, once so rare, are now so commonplace. According to the New York Times, 42 of the 48 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa conducted multi-party elections between 1990 and 2002. The newspaper also reported that between 2000 and 2002, ruling parties in four African countries (Senegal, Mauritius, Ghana and Mali) peacefully handed over power to victorious opposition parties. In addition, the proportion of African countries categorized as not free by Freedom House declined from 59% in 1983 to 35% in 2003 (Buhari, 2015).

It is affirmed that the nature of political society and its economic structure, among other factors, speaks volume about the political parties and their attitude towards contest for control of political power (Tyoden, 1994:120). For a multicultural society, political parties in the country are yet to move beyond the symbolism of election to representation of social divisions in structuring political conflicts thereby contributing to the consolidation of democracy in the country (Ibrahim and Hassan, 2014:2). Political parties in Nigeria since the return to democratic rule have not been able to adequately contribute to the consolidation of democracy in the country, rather they have been plagued by crises of internal democracy and have contributed to the bifurcation of the country along religious and ethnic lines (ibid:9). Thus, the Political parties are far from being democratic, financially sound and publicly accountable institutions. Instead,

internal wrangling, dominance by individual leaders, male dominance, lack of accountability and poverty characterise the workings of these political parties.

It is a fact that political parties are potentially the most active and legitimate instruments for mobilising broad participation in the political process. They are therefore, an indispensable foundation-stone for participatory democracy. However, there tends to be a proliferation of weak and ineffective opposition political parties, particularly since 1999. These opposition parties usually fail to see the wisdom of presenting a united front against the dominant political party and therefore, fail to make any significant impact at the polls for many years after the achievement of independence. van Eerd (2014:9) argues that under the condition that a competitive opposition – even if too weak to take power – challenges the dominant government party, the quality of democracy will improve over time. A competitive opposition that challenges the dominant party, forces the dominant party’s rulers to invest in their party’s own cohesiveness and accountability towards voters.

Political parties are central in elections and thus contribute significantly to its success or failure. Their activities in choosing and presenting credible candidates, conducting electioneering campaigns, participating in the actual elections and handling the outcome of elections and acting as a loyal opposition to the government have been crucial to the failure of Nigeria’s three Republics (Ikeanyibe, 2008:75) As succinctly captured by Gbadegesin (2013), the virtue of the political party, to articulate the foremost interests and aspirations of citizens, has not always been the motivating factor for a good number of contemporary political parties. The political party has been turned into a business organization where the pecuniary interests of the leadership are dominant; but they are able to access political power and keep it because of their ability to manipulate the citizenry.

Ruling parties in Africa have also become more proficient and creative in orchestrating electoral fraud. Their control of the nation’s security apparatus, unopposed access to vast resources and the powers of appointing electoral commission officials enable them to skew and manipulate elections in their favour (Okon, 2009:6). Similarly, by monopolizing financial and political power, the oligarchic system poses financial barriers to the formation of effective oppositional political parties (USAID, 2006:2). Nigerian political parties are described as “empty

shells, sprouting up every four years before elections, yet without roots in civil society, meaningful principled platforms, or specific policy agendas. Parties are funded by wealthy oligarchs who privately determine access to political office without even the pretense of primaries or popular legitimacy” (ibid:15). For the opposition parties, they seem not to have a common idea of what they want to achieve. Each party appears to have been formed to pursue an agenda contra-lateral to that of the others. This is so because where these parties are not platforms for certain principal stakeholders and regional parties formed to advance sectional interests against those of the other regions.

One observable common feature of African party systems is a lack of competitiveness, as dominant party systems replace many of the one party systems of the past. African party systems are also characterized by high volatility, with numerous new parties forming as each election approaches, often only to melt away shortly afterward (Logan, 2008:1). However, it is argued that opposition parties have a better chance of winning election if united against a ruling party. According to IDEA (2007, cited in Omilusi, 2014:395), “coalitions as forms of party-to-party-partnership are common to all countries, and are political mechanisms for aggregating interests and reaching a middle ground in order to form the government in situations where no single political party wins the majority of parliamentary seats”. Opposition coalition is also considered a workable strategy in a presidential system of government (either in a plurality voting system based on First-Past-The-Post or the one that requires 50 percent for a winner to emerge). In Nigeria, the word opposition has become not only a taboo but abnormality and to belong to an opposition political party is seen by many as being dead politically or to subscribe to a mission impossible in one’s political career. Hence, the desire of most politicians or potential party adherents is to look for the winning party or ruling party (Adeola, 2014:59).

The Merger of Opposition Parties as a Turning Point

Previous attempts by Nigerian opposition parties to form alliances to oust the PDP-led government from power, since 1999 have recorded dismal failure mostly as a result of individual differences of the lead protagonists in these political parties, their inability to agree on sharing of positions and ethnic, regional and religious differences (Ibrahim and Hassan, 2014:2). However, on July 31st, 2013, the electoral authority 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. On considering the application, the Commission found that the applicant-parties have met all statutory requirements for the merger, and has accordingly granted their request.

The People’s Democratic Party (PDP) had held office since the 1999 transition, boasting the self-proclaimed title of “Africa’s largest political party” and governing through a massive, multiethnic elite coalition held together mainly by the prospect of access to federal resources and the personal wealth that accompanies it (Kendhammer, 2015:170). Thus, the merger of the leading opposition parties was not simply a marriage of election-season convenience, but a new, permanent operation designed to challenge the PDP directly. The coalition was bolstered in November 2013 by the decision of five People’s Democratic Party, PDP, governors to merge with the opposition All Progressives Congress, APC. This marked the turning point after several months of simmering crisis within the ruling party. According to Obianyo, (2015), the failure of the PDP to address questions around poor governance and the lack of democratic process within the party strengthened the nascent APC.

Prominent members of the PDP also left the party under controversial circumstances that further decimated it while boosting the chances of the opposition. For instance, after having served eight years in the party, former President Olusegun Obasanjo announced his quit and publicly tore his membership card saying he would no longer stay in politics. Although he did not defect to the APC, he nonetheless humiliated the party in front of the whole country. Also, a former Vice President of Nigeria announced his decision to leave the PDP on 2 February 2014. In an interview with the BBC’s Newsday Programme (cited in Ejiofor, 2014), Atiku Abubakar maintained that he did not join the opposition party so that he could contest presidential elections but to enhance APC’s development and ensure that good governance is entrenched in Nigeria. He also said he would never come back to the PDP. In 2014, after several months of speculations too, Aminu Tambuwal, Speaker, House of Representatives, finally dumped the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) for the All Progressives Congress (APC).

Obviously, Nigerian political parties do not have a remarkable history of mergers or alliances. The first experience of pre-electoral alliance was in 1999 when the defunct All Peoples Party (APP) and the defunct Alliance of Democracy (AD) formed an alliance to contest the presidential election with Chief Olu Falae of the AD as the presidential flag bearer with Umaru Shinkafi of the All Peoples Party (APP) as running mate. However, the alliance of these parties

failed to achieve the parties' desired objective of capturing power (Ibrahim and Hassan, 2014:2). Thus, the alliance collapsed immediately after the elections. Another demonstration of this problem occurred during the 2011 presidential election when attempts for an alliance between the Action Congress of Nigeria, ACN and the Congress for Progressive Change, CPC, failed. The last-minute collapse of the alliance, as observed by Ochonu (2015) was a setback for oppositional politics in the short term as it forestalled the emergence of a potential touchstone for defeating the PDP.

Traditionally, competition in Nigeria's party system is very intense within the ruling party and less so between the political parties. In previous republics, the ruling parties have too often controlled the electoral game while the parties in opposition had too narrow a political base and insufficient resources to effectively compete for power. It is in this context that the emergence of the APC was perceived a potential game changer in the Nigerian party system (Olakitan, 2015). The APC entered the 2015 campaign cycle with a national grassroots network, control of 14 governorships, and (following a late flurry of defections and party switches) a majority of seats in the federal House of Representatives (Kendhammer, 2015:172). While unfolding the APC manifesto, the party chairman, John Odigie-Oyegun had in 2014 noted that:

Since the historic merger that resulted in the birth of the All Progressives Congress, APC in July 2013, our intention has been to develop a set of guiding principles based on the needs of all Nigerians on how to collectively chart our future as a people and our destiny as a nation...The decay in Nigeria's political and economic structures can be traced to poor governance and dysfunctional public administration. APC promises free and fair elections at all levels, respect for the rule of law, promotion of transparency genuine anti-corruption measures. We will implement efficient public financial management strategies and ensure true federalism (See <http://www.apcpressreleases.com/the-apc-manifesto/2/>).

As noted by Osori (2015) "the context of the 2015 elections is linked to the history of Nigerian politics, the civil war, decades of ethno-religious strife and the unfortunate reality that politics is a lucrative business". By most accounts, the 2015 presidential and legislative polls are the most competitive since the return to civilian rule in 1999. Many Nigerians attribute this newfound competitiveness to fissures within the ruling PDP and the emergence of a viable opposition party – the APC – resulting from a merger in 2013 of four main opposition parties earlier mentioned. Although 12 other candidates were on the ballot for the presidential election, the ultimate race was between the then incumbent President, Goodluck Jonathan and the APC's Major General (rtd.) Muhammadu Buhari. In three previous attempts, Buhari had been dogged by

complaints and public perceptions of being sectional and insensitive to Nigeria's diversity and thus was never able to cross-out beyond the North. This time, a coalition with some Southern leaders and an image building campaign that had some success in changing public perceptions about him helped steer the election in his favour (Nwobu, 2015:2). In its editorial, the Premium Times (2015) submits that:

It was possibly the most divisive election, drawing Nigerians into a devious web of mudslinging as well as ethnic and religious chauvinism. Eventually the election turned out to be largely a referendum on key national issues pertaining to the state of the country's economy and security. This historic election was fought-and-won by Nigerians who appeared to have crucially determined to assert their position as the real employers of those in power, and on whose behalf and on whose benefits power should only be exercised.

Voter turnout, already noted to be low during the Presidential elections, was notably lower still during the gubernatorial elections, raising questions as to the reasons behind the visible voter apathy for the process. What is not questionable however is the level of popular disenchantment with the 16-year rule of the PDP which translated to votes for the APC that led the party to victory not just in the presidential and gubernatorial polls, but also in the legislative elections (africappractice, 2015:2). During the election campaign, President Buhari and the APC promised "change" to a population reeling from inter-group mistrust, insecurity, grand political corruption, unequal and jobless economic growth, and systemic failures of political governance (Suberu, 2015:3). As a Presidential candidate, he had summarized his change agenda thus:

- A country that you can be proud of at anytime and anywhere: where corruption is tackled, where your leaders are disciplined and lead with vision and clarity; where the stories that emerge to the world from us are full of hope and progress.
- A Nigeria in which neither you, nor your parents, families or friends will have to fear for your safety, or for theirs.
- A Nigeria where citizens get the basics that any country should provide: infrastructure that works, healthcare that is affordable, even free; respect for the environment and sustainable development, education that is competitive and outcome-oriented in a knowledge-economy.
- A country that provides jobs for its young people, reducing unemployment to the lowest of single digits and providing safety nets so that no one is left behind.
- A Nigeria where entrepreneurship thrives, enterprise flourishes and the government gets out of your way so that you can create value, build the economy and aggressively expand wealth (The Nation, January 1, 2015).

One particularly courageous idea in the APC platform, according to Ochonu (2015), is that of defining, once and for all, the primacy of residency over autochthony in determining access to

the rights and privileges of citizenship. He observes other programmes that could alleviate the living standard of the masses but also, expresses some reservation on implementation considering the reality of economic situation:

Another radical and ideologically refreshing promise is that of instituting a system of welfare stipend payments to the aged, the physically challenged, the temporarily unemployed, out-of-college youths, and very poor citizens. The APC also promises to provide one meal a day to all primary school students and to substantially expand free access to healthcare for the most vulnerable Nigerians. Questions remain about how the APC purposes to implement some of these impressively crafted programs in light of the falling price of crude oil, the major source of national revenue, the attendant depletion of Nigeria's foreign reserves, and the collapse of the Naira.

Nigerians therefore, expect President Muhammadu Buhari to put in place the right building blocks that are crucial for effective diversification. This requires a focus on five pillars (i) secure good governance and property rights, (ii) support an enabling environment for private investment and export growth, (iii) facilitate the implementation of credible policies to support infrastructural development, (iv) investment in human capital to boost innovation, and; (v) finally, strengthen regional and international cooperation (Adedokun, 2015). As rightly noted by Ekwo (2015) Nigeria faces a daunting task under Buhari, but the country is no stranger to doomsday predictions. He must harness the goodwill and resilience of Nigerians and the international community to usher in real change. The APC, according to the Guardian Editorial (October 1, 2015), must effect the changes that should redirect, regenerate, and reposition Nigeria for its deserving place in the global arena. And the best place to start is, in the words of the first article in the APC manifesto, 'initiate action to amend Constitution with a view to devolving powers, duties and responsibilities to states and local governments in order to entrench true Federalism and the federal spirit.'

The Ruling People's Democratic Party and Vociferous Opposition: Lai Mohammed as Mouth Piece

The PDP was formed in 1998 as Nigeria began a transition to civilian rule. The PDP won the presidential elections of 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011. Since the transition of 1998–1999 it has continuously controlled a plurality of state governorships, Senate seats, and, with a brief exception from December 2013 to February 2014, House of Representatives seats (Thurston, 2015:7). By adopting a careful system of internal power-sharing institutions to rotate access to key party and elected offices among ethno-regional blocs, the party attracted the most skillful

national politicians, each of whom could count (in the fullness of time) on a chance at the heights of power. Once it controlled the federal government and most state houses, its leading political operators-the so-called “godfathers”-used the resources of office, including control over government contracts and the petroleum sector, to finance their reelections (Kendhammer, 2015:171).

The first prerequisite in understanding opposition politics, as posited by Ebiefa (2014:406) is to first and foremost identify the major actors in opposition politics and these include: the government in power, opposition political parties; individuals and groups that criticise the programmes and policies of the ruling party. It is within this context that the role of Lai Mohammed, as opposition party spokesperson, is examined in this essay. The name Lai Mohammed, according to Daily Independent (April 30, 2013), has since been synonymous with the party and he has kept the ruling PDP on its toes in the last eight years before the success of his party in the last general elections. Mohammed’s timely alarm at critical juncture of the democratic journey has been a balm to most despondent Nigerians who have lost hope on the Nigerian project. Like most successful party spokesmen, Mohammed knows the importance of the media in a democracy; and he equally knows that the media would always take side with the underdog in any contest, in this case the opposition. Hence, his unusual zeal and ability to go the extra mile to court the media, by not only churning out well researched and well written press statements, but also knowing the appropriate time to release it to the public.

In his historical analysis of party politics in Nigeria and the importance of publicity, Oladesu (2013) recalls that former Premier of Western Region and First Republic opposition leader, Obafemi Awolowo understood the role of the opposition in democracy. Thus, he also fortified the publicity organs of the two political parties he led; the Action Group (AG) and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN); by appointing competent publicists to tackle the ruling parties and canvassed the alternative routes to federal power. In the First Republic, AG Publicity Secretaries were the intellectuals and ideologues; the witty Ajibola Ige and Banji Akintoye, who were thorns in the flesh of Balewa and Akintola governments. In the Second Republic, UPN’s spokesman was the brilliant analyst, MCK Ajuluchukwu, the Director of Research and Publicity, whose efforts were complemented by the gifted orator, Ebenezer Babatope. In those days, the opposition was

active and alive to its democratic responsibilities. In the present dispensation, Oladesu submits that:

Mohammed has combined the incisive wit and boldness of Bola Ige, the intellectual sagacity of Akintoye and ideological strength of Ajuluchukwu, in the discharge of his onerous responsibility as the opposition spokesman and image builder.

Lai Mohammed is a lawyer and former National Publicity Secretary of the All Progressive Congress (APC). He was born into the family of Mohammed Adekeye in 1952. He earned a bachelor's degree in French from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in 1975 and Law degrees from the University of Lagos and the Nigerian Law School in 1986 (The Nation, 2015 cited in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lai_Mohammed) He co-founded the legal firm of Edu & Mohammed as a Senior Partner in 1989. Lai Mohammed is an astute businessman and an active politician. In October 2002, Lai Mohammed was a candidate for governor in the April 2003 Kwara State elections on the Alliance for Democracy platform (ibid).

The words of Ebenezer Babatope (cited in Kolawole, 2015:36), a man who played similar role during the Second Republic when he was the voice of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), aptly captured the existentialism of Mohammed: "I am a member of the People's Democratic Party that since 1999 has been in contention with the opposition political party represented by Lai Mohammed as its Chief Publicist. Our ideas differ. Our approach is never the same as both parties, (The PDP and CAN) are diametrically opposed on nearly all socio-political issues facing Nigeria. His writings, his press releases and his political utterances designed to explain the positions of his party are so brilliantly and intellectually presented that one cannot but love his person and love the style of his presentation" In his remarks of Lai Mohammed, Muhammadu Buhari (cited in Oladesu, 2013) recalls that:

I first noticed him in the political space in 2003 when I was also making my initial foray into politics, when he resigned his privileged position as chief of staff to the then Lagos State Governor, Bola Tinubu to run for the governorship of Kwara State under the platform of the Alliance for Democracy. I have come to the conclusion that he is more than a spokesman for his party, more than a loyal brain box of the ACN and Bola Tinubu, but the loudest and consistent voice in the defense of democracy, liberty and justice in our country under the Fourth Republic

According to the former Niger State Governor, Muazu Aliyu Babangida, Mohammed's courageous assessment of government policies through his press releases were lucid, and just did not leave the issues hanging at an accusatory realm, but prescribed options and alternative

strategies and actions (Good Books Africa, 2013). He added that Mohammed brought an admirable angle into opposition politics by not being just a critic of the people and party in power, but by altruistically offering his services to others since he veered into politics during the turbulent transition to the ill-fated 3rd Republic (Onyemaechi, 2013).

Governance after Elections: A Reversal of Roles

Nigeria's March 28, 2015 presidential election was, perhaps, one of the most bitterly fought in the annals of the country's electoral history. The election occurred after a controversial six-week postponement following insistence by security agencies that it should be pushed forward for them to accelerate the battle against the insurgency in the North East. The voting pattern, as observed in the Vanguard editorial (June 4, 2015), illustrated a deeply divided country, with 17 States in the old North and four States of the old West bunching together for Buhari and the All Progressives Congress, APC, while the old East and a sprinkling of States from around the country remained with the defeated Peoples Democratic Party, PDP. Nevertheless, the election turned out to be largely a referendum on key national issues pertaining to the state of the country's economy and security. This historic election was "fought-and-won by Nigerians who appeared to have crucially determined to assert their position as the real employers of those in power, and on whose behalf and on whose benefits power should only be exercised. The lesson of who truly wields power and whose interests should really matter in a democracy has definitely been affirmed" (Premium Times, 2015).

On the political governance front, Nigeria faces deep rooted historical and structural constraints that need to be recognized, especially in planning coherent development and democracy assistance. These constraints include lack of transparency and accountability in the management and appropriation of public resources; prevalence of patron-client relations; insufficient separation of powers; inadequate physical infrastructure; poverty and inequality; exclusion and unemployment especially among the youth; poor public service delivery; and citizen alienation from government (UNDP, 2012:11). For over 50 years, Nigerians have celebrated every military or civilian regime only to lose patience and fall into depression. Under the civilian administrations, they have often summoned the military to come to their rescue (Kukah, 2015). Hence, an assessment of the new administration's prospects for successfully navigating these challenges can yield either cautious optimism or reasoned pessimism. Despite

Nigeria's socio-political travails, its recent history shows its resilience as a nation and the capacity for reform (Suberu, 2015:3).

Until very recently, most Nigerians - and many others besides - believed that the powerful ruling PDP would be able to win every election either by genuinely attracting support at the ballot box or by intimidation or manipulation (Thomas Mösch, 2015). The political climate in the run-up to the 2015 elections was tense and acrimonious, as both the incumbent Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the lead opposition party All Progressives Congress (APC), backed by competing opinion polls, predicted victory. The Nigerian rumor and conspiracy mill was (and remains) in full swing, fuelled by social media and an often politicized news media. Leading party figures and their supporters hurled mutual insults and accusations, and alarmingly, religion became a more prominent wedge issue that party stalwarts on both sides showed little compunction in exploiting (Cooke, 2015).

According to an Afrobarometer poll released in January 2015, 50 percent of respondents personally feared becoming a victim of violence during the polls as compared to 24 percent of respondents in 2011, with fears that women would be more likely than men to experience personal victimization at the polls (Daniel, Mbaegbu and Lewis, 2015 cited in National Democratic Institute, 2015). These fears were exacerbated by virulent rhetoric and hate speech by candidate surrogates during the campaign period (NDI, 2015). Thus, the 2015 general elections were the most competitive polls since the country's transition to democratic rule in 1999. They also were conducted within a political context that has been impacted by several negative factors over the years.

Jonathan conceded after results showed him losing by some 2.7 million votes. Buhari's democratic victory marks a return to power after three decades. He headed Nigeria for nearly two years after leading a military coup in 1983 (Democracy Now, 2015). According to Olubodun (2015), "never has a sitting president been defeated in an election and politicians are beginning to see the need to be accountable and that there are consequences for certain types of governance". Buhari and the APC's victory marks the first electoral turnover from one party to another in Nigeria's history, and it is a watershed moment in the continent's political life (Kendhammer, 2015:172).

As a former military leader who took power through a coup in 1983, Buhari's candidacy was held by opponents to symbolise a return to a repressive past. Yet, he has since fought in three democratic contests, and claims to have learned from his stint in office. He presents himself as a born-again democrat. And he won on a campaign to root out corruption - a fundamental source of perversion of state institutions and of popular faith in them. Similarly, he promised to strengthen core institutions to enhance the provision of justice and the rule of law (Haenlein, 2015). While assessing the post-PDP governance in relation to the APC's new status as a ruling party, Odunuga (2015:11) submits that:

By now, the APC should realise that the honeymoon is over. It cannot be on a driver's seat and still be heckling like it did as a shadow government. If the APC fails to exert itself in drafting a clear-cut developmental strategy that is visible for all to see; if it struggles to put its cabinet together; if the President keeps lamenting about the encumbrances imposed on his performance by a constitution that spells out how things should be done in a federating union, then it should not blame Metuh for his cacophonous and sometimes annoying refrain about a confused party that only thought of grabbing power before thinking of what to do with it!

According to Gbadegesin (2015:48), the change campaign slogan of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Muhammadu Buhari, its presidential candidate in the 2015 general election, resonated with a substantial majority of Nigerians culminating in the historical defeat of an incumbent for the first time in Nigerian history. The presupposition of the change mantra and its acceptance by the electorate was that the status quo was no longer tenable or acceptable. With youth unemployment up in the stratosphere and generalised poverty and its attendant miserable existence ravaging the nation while a few amass stupendous wealth, many Nigerians felt neglected and unappreciated by their government. In view of the reality of post-election governance, Gbadegesin posits further:

While many saw presidential candidate Buhari as a Nigerian nationalist who can bring sanity to a broken system, others saw him as a sectional irredentist. And as he emerged as the elected president, that division still endures...Beside the pre-existing realities, however, the new administration and the coalition that brought it to power have had to deal with a new reality which is no less challenging. APC was marketed as the party of change. But since its assumption of responsibility for the running of the nation, it has struggled with its own inner demons, to the delight of its main rival, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). It appears that the party of change has not been well prepared for the discipline that it takes to govern with a mission of change.

Prior to the swearing-in of the new President, Lai Mohammed (See, Nossiter, 2015) had lamented the governance crisis to be inherited by his party. According to him: "Never in the history of our country has any government handed over to another a more distressed country: no electricity, no fuel, workers are on strike, billions are owed to state and federal workers, 60 billion

dollars are owed in national debt and the economy is virtually grounded.” And now, it is posited that addressing the big insecurity challenges in the Northeast, corruption, sustainable energy needs, and poverty connected to the human indicators of education, health, food security, and job creation (formal or entrepreneurial), are the main stated governance pillars for the new Buhari Government (Robin Sanders, 2015).

Interestingly, a reversal of roles seems to be playing out in the nation’s politics with Lai Mohammed as a minister of information and culture and Olisah Mentuh as spokesperson for the major opposition party. Lai Mohammed- now on the defensive side- has started receiving attacks from the PDP. In its assessment of the ruling party’s level of preparedness-from the prism of the 2016 budget- the PDP, through its spokesperson, Olisa Metuh (Vanguard, December 23, 2015:2) expresses some fear: “By all standards, the 2016 budget, the first major economic policy outing of this government, is completely unrealistic and duplicitously embellished with impractical predications, a development that confirms fears by economy watchers and investors that this administration is obviously ill-equipped for governance”.

In his reaction, Lai Mohammed noted that: “If there was still any honour left among thieves, there is no way the leaders of a party under whose watch the nation’s economy suffered a monumental mismanagement and the Central Bank was turned to the ATM or piggy bank of a few people will have the temerity to insult a government that is working hard to turn things around or the citizens who are bearing the brunt of such mismanagement” (Vanguard, Dec 14, 2015). Mohammed also described the comments credited to Ekweremadu that businesses may collapse in the next six months because the Buhari administration had mismanaged the economy, as the clearest indication that the PDP and its leaders are still in denial about the massive body blows they inflicted on the Nigerian economy (Daily Trust, Dec 19, 2015).

The PDP accused the ruling party of using propaganda to win election and according to Olisa Metuh, in many of his media briefings since the new government assumed office, propaganda is still being used to run government (Sanusi, 2015). According to Obi (2015), Mohammed, as the National Publicity Secretary of a political party, Mohammed had the responsibility to sell his party and its agenda to the public: “In doing that, he was at liberty to employ whatever tool that he considered effective, including propaganda. And Mohammed made so much

capital out of this tool. But his role has since changed. As Minister of the Federal Republic, Mohammed is not permitted to employ the tool of propaganda in telling the story of the government he serves”.

However, there is an emerging trend too that portrays the ruling APC as intolerant of criticisms from the opposition. In fact, Lai Mohammed once accused Olisah Metuh of publishing libelous material against him. The minister filed a lawsuit on October 12, 2015, claiming that Mr. Metuh had defamed him in a publication that came out on September 20, 2015 (See Saharareporters, Nov 7, 2015). In a statement early this year (2016), the PDP confirmed this observation: “unfortunate the APC and its leaders, who gleefully and unjustifiably poured invectives on former President Goodluck Jonathan in the guise of playing the role of an opposition party, would not want to condone criticisms...” (Channels TV, January 2, 2016). Schneider (2015) contends that while the PDP was thoroughly outplayed by a more modern, sophisticated electoral organisation that points to a positive development in Nigeria’s governance, the PDP needs to take the next step and not allow the APC to develop into a political franchise that exists predominantly to rule, rather than to implement its agenda.

Concluding Remarks

Although it appears unclear to researchers as to whether elections should be seen as instruments of control or influence exercised by citizens over policy makers (Powell, 2004 cited in Egwu, 2009:253), both majoritarian and proportional visions of representation agree that election represents a strong mechanism for either punishing or rewarding incumbents. However, many political scientists have not considered Nigeria to be a democracy, because prior to the 2015 election there had never been a peaceful transition of power. Since independence, Nigeria has gone through many trials and tribulations. Like most post-colonial societies, they have struggled with issues of governance and corruption, military coup d’états, and issues of resource dependence (see <http://bigtroublelittleplanet.blogspot.com/2015/07/nigeria-2015-peaceful-transition-of.html>).

One of the fundamental bases for the development of democracy, therefore, is the recognition of the rights of political and social actors to publicly criticize and challenge the government, its actions, and policies (Helms, 2008 cited in Okewale, 2014:171). The challenge

now is to advance democracy in a way that is dynamic and sustainable. The democratization process must move beyond elections and address such issues as civil liberties, individual and communal rights, basic freedoms, human dignity, the rule of law and good governance. In this climate Nigerians can also acknowledge their responsibilities to each other and to society (IDEA, 2001:3).

It is posited that accountability on the part of government officials, transparency in governmental procedures, predictability in government behaviour and expectation of rational decisions, openness in government transaction, free flow of information and freedom of press, decentralization of power structure and decision making should be binding parameters for any democratic government (Weart, 1998:90). Conditions that are conducive for democratisation include but are not limited to: peace and people-centred development; low levels of violence; the development of political contestation before the expansion of political participation; acceptance of the rules governing participative democracy and the electoral outcome; co-operation that cuts across subcultures; political trust; and a belief in compromise and the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Mill, 1962).

Also, a peaceful transfer of power is considered one of the hallmarks of a democracy, making the 2015 election a critical one for Nigeria's fledgling regime. Though electoral activity is judged by some scholars to facilitate democratic learning, consolidation is inevitably a much longer-term process. What matters more is what happens once a new leader is in place (Haenlein, 2015). Apart from the challenges facing political parties in Nigeria, the country's electoral democracy itself remains work in progress and more capacity is required to strengthen a number of other institutions – i.e. mainly the legislature, judiciary, civil society and media – to engage effectively and meaningfully with elections, thereby contributing to democratic consolidation in the country (UNDP, 2012:11). While canvassing for governance reforms in the country, the former Commonwealth Secretary- General, Emeka Anyaoku (2012) declared that: "I do not believe that we can successfully tackle the serious challenges currently facing our country on the basis of our existing constitution and architecture of governance. Without far-reaching changes to the 1999 Constitution and our present governance structure, our quest for peace, stability and development will remain elusive."

There is no empirical evidence to suggest that Lai Mohammed's role as opposition spokesperson actually swayed electorates' votes for his party during the 2015 elections because there were many factors, as documented elsewhere, that fundamentally worked in favour of the APC. In fact, the opinion held in some quarters is that Nigerian voters actually voted against the Peoples Democratic Party rather than showing preference for the All Progressive Congress. What cannot go unacknowledged however, is Lai Mohammed's consistency in bringing to the consciousness of the weary Nigerians the weaknesses and obnoxious policies of the then ruling party. This may have ignited the people's level of disenchantment towards the administration and influenced their choice at the polls. According to Adamu (Vanguard, Jan 2, 2016), "much as they attempted to demonise the man before and during the last general elections, Nigerians sided with him by rewarding his party with their votes, which in turn propelled the party to power".

It is established in this essay that opposition parties have the function to criticise the government and put up constructive alternatives. This function is of great significance for a democracy, because without opposition a government tends to drift towards complacency and fails to search for alternatives. In Nigeria's fourth republic, the dynamics of opposition politics seem to have been reinvigorated with the intervention of Lai Mohammed since the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) era and now the tempo is being sustained by the new opposition party in the country. This is against the usual norm of the PDP to remain passive in states where it ought to be playing active opposition politics, particularly in the southwest before this political dispensation- when AD/ACN was controlling the six South-West states.

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