



PARTY CONGRESS AS A FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: THE CASE STUDY OF ONDO STATE

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This study examines the role of party congress in Nigeria as the cornerstone of democratic governance. Through the utilization of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and extensive literature review, the study explores the significance of party congress in shaping democratic process within the Nigerian political landscape. Key Informants including ward party chairmen, women, youth leaders and party chieftains were interviewed to gain insights into the functions and impact of party congress on democratic governance in Nigeria. The findings highlight the role of party congress as a platform for party members to participate in decision-making process and candidate selection. The study unveils a concerning trend where party elites frequently manipulate and dominate the conduct of party congresses, leading to the imposition of preferred candidates for general elections. This practice undermines the democratic principles of inclusivity, transparency, and fair competition within political parties, ultimately weakening the democratic governance system in Nigeria. The study recommends the need for reforms and the involvement of civil society organizations to put pressure on political parties to embrace and adhere to the electoral act and political parties' guidelines for conduct of open and transparent party congress system. This will guarantee credible party congress and enhance democratic governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Party Congress, Party Politics, Party Primary, Democratic Governance, Nigeria

Introduction

Party congress in Nigeria's party politics has gained much concern in political discourse as its practice undermines democratic principles. There are two major factors that influence the direction of democratic governance across the globe. According to Adekeye and Ambali (2017), these include the character and nature of political leadership on the one hand; and the approach to party politics and internal democracy on the other. The peculiarity of the Nigerian State, in terms of socio-cultural, ethnic and religious inclination in political party formation has made it difficult for party politics and internal democracy to thrive on the tenets and principles of credible election.

Researches conducted by Iwu (2020), Ayoade (2006), Ikechukwu (2015), Aiyede (2006), Kura (2011), Adekeye and Ambali (2017), Gambo (2006), Ukase (2016), Ibrahim, Danladi and Adamu (2015), Omotola (2009), and Nnaji (2021) indicates, that Nigeria has not been adhering

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to the rules of politics. In light of this, it is imperative to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the importance of credible party congress as the foundation of internal democracy and democratic governance. The focus on party primaries and elections in Nigerian politics, as highlighted in literature, has overshadowed the significance of party congress, which serves as the core of political parties in a democratic transition. Democracy, defined as the government of elected representatives of the people (Graham, 1992), emphasises popular participation, respect for individual rights, equitable distribution of opportunities and wealth, and the prioritization of the will of the majority over the minority for the greater good of society (Arthur, 1992; and Mill, 1992).

In contemporary democracy, elected officials can truly be considered representatives of the public if they are elected through a democratic process that is free, fair, peaceful, and credible. The principles of representative democracy cannot be maintained if those in power manipulate the candidate selection process. Representative democracy is structured such that political parties must hold party congresses as a prerequisite for party primaries, ensuring that all party members have an equal opportunity to be elected as representatives of the people. Party congresses are intended to set the stage for democratic parties' primaries. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, since the return to democratic governance in 1999, this has not been the case. Party congress, which is the cornerstone of candidate selection for general elections has been hijacked by influential party members and political machines. The practice of imposition of candidates by party big-wigs has become the practice. This statement echoes the views of Iwu (2020: 33), who argued that influential party members consistently influence election outcomes. This ugly trend has significantly undermined the legitimacy of internal democracy within the country. It is evident that the concept of democratic governance is unattainable when the process of candidates' selection is manipulated and controlled by political godfathers and money-bag politicians. Any party congress that is influenced by financial motives or manipulation by wealthy politicians will not prioritise the interests of the people or ensure a fair primary election. This is because those who provide financial support ultimately have the power to dictate the outcome of the process.

In modern societies, democracies operate as representative rather than direct. Elected representatives in contemporary democracies are chosen through a process involving party congress and party primaries. In Nigeria, the outcomes of party congresses have been contentious issues. When party congress outcomes are manipulated and influenced through imposition mechanisms, it hinders the ability to select credible and accountable candidates who truly represent the will of the people. This results in political elites, godfathers, party machines, and the highest bidder dominating and ruling without regard for the dividends of democracy and national development. The critical questions that arise are: What lies ahead for party congress in Nigeria? Can party congress improve without robust institutional mechanisms and the involvement of civil society to prevent candidate imposition and manipulation during the process? This paper delves into the significance of party congress as the cornerstone of democratic governance in Nigeria, aiming to underscore the importance and consequences of having a credible party congress in shaping party politics and democratic governance in the country.



Objectives of the Study

The main goal of this study is to analyse party congresses as an integral component of democratic governance in Nigeria. The specific aims include investigating the procedures involved in conducting party congresses in Nigeria, examining the obstacles faced during these processes, and identifying potential strategies to mitigate the imposition of party candidates during party congresses in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study adopts the descriptive research design using a combination of secondary and primary data. In particular, the primary data included interviews with Key Informants who provided detailed information crucial to the study. The utilization of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) was essential for obtaining first-hand information that enhanced the study and ensured a robust analysis. Fifteen key informant interviews were conducted with representatives of the three major political parties in Ondo State during the most recent election: PDP, APC and LP. These interviews involved key figures such as ward party chairmen, women, and youth leaders, whose insights were influential in understanding party operations and the conduct of party congresses. The purposive sampling was used for the selection of the respondents. Secondary data was gathered from published literature such as books, journals, newspapers, online materials, and relevant publications from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The integration of both primary and secondary data was deliberate to strengthen the study's findings through a comprehensive content analysis.

Conceptual Discussions

Party Congress

There is a lack of extensive literature focusing specifically on party congresses in Nigeria. Within political discussions, the term "party congress" is often used interchangeably with other terms such as "conference" and "convention" to convey a similar meaning. According to Courtney (2015) and BBC (2007), the term "conference" (in UK English), "political convention" (in US and Canadian English), and "party congress" typically refer to a general meeting of a political party. The usage of these terms varies significantly depending on the country and context in which they are employed. Likewise, Section 85 (1) of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) defines a party congress as a convention, conference, or meeting called to elect members of its executive committees, other governing bodies, or nominate candidates for elective offices outlined in the Act. The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2010) defines a congress as a large formal gathering or series of meetings where representatives from diverse groups discuss ideas and make decisions. BBC (2007) considers a party congress as a political party event where local councillors, policy advisors, and ordinary party members convene to debate and vote on policies, listen to their leaders speak, and discuss current matters of interest. Party congresses are gatherings attended by members of political parties who hold official membership cards (Courtney, 2015; and BBC, 2007). In essence, a party congress denotes a formal assembly of a political party where discussions take place regarding party policies and the selection process for candidates in upcoming elections. Essentially, it is during party congresses that political parties make



decisions regarding the type of primary election to be utilised for selecting candidates for general elections.

It is understood that within most political parties, party congresses are tasked to determine the process for electing or nominating party delegates who will elect candidates during party primaries for general elections. Delegates representing the party membership typically attend party congresses (Kura, 2011; and Ibrahim, et al, 2015). These congresses occur at various levels, including ward, local, state, and national. For instance, in order to become the presidential or gubernatorial nominee for an upcoming election, a candidate must secure the majority votes of his party's state delegates (for presidential elections) and local government delegates (for gubernatorial elections) to solidify his candidacy. This illustrates the significant role that party congresses play in endorsing party candidates for the general elections. In contemporary democracies, candidates for political positions across all levels are elected through the convening of party congresses. The primary purpose of party congress was to eradicate the corruption present in the caucus system and prevent manipulation of the nomination process by influential party members and political machines. In essence, party congress was established to replace the traditionally exclusive and clandestine caucus system of candidate selection by party leaders and influential figures (Kura, 2011). The underlying notion is that party congress will ensure a more transparent and democratic selection process of candidates, while reducing the susceptibility to manipulation by party machines. In sum, party congress serves as the formal gathering where political parties officially determine the method of selecting their nominees (candidates) for a general election and establish a party platform. The party congress is a crucial prerequisite for party primaries. It serves as a foundational cornerstone and a significant component of the electoral process. A credible party congress is therefore of utmost importance for the advancement and maintenance of democratic governance in Nigeria.

Party Primaries

In representative democracies, party primaries are established and sanctioned by legislation to facilitate the selection of candidates for elective positions (Aiyede, 2006; and Odigwe, 2015). According to Aluoma et al (In Adekeye and Ambali, 2017:8), party primaries are defined as "the initial electoral competition among candidates in order to secure their parties' nominations for the overall election." Essentially, party primaries are the means by which political parties choose individuals to represent them in general elections. Nnaji (2021:64) similarly views party primaries as the processes by which political parties select candidates to run for election under their party's banner. He argues that party primaries are a form of pre-election poll conducted to nominate a party's candidate. Iwu (2020), Odigwe (2015), Adekeye and Ambali (2017:8), Ikechukwu (2015:113), and Nnaji (2021:64) emphasise the importance of party primaries in political parties' participation in general elections. Essentially, the fundamental purpose of party primaries is to ensure the selection of capable and qualified candidates in order to enhance electoral success and promote democratic practices within political parties. Internal democracy involves conducting elections for party members and their representatives in a fair and transparent manner, with equal participation from all members of the party (Odigwe, 2015; Adekeye and Ambali, 2017). In essence, internal democracy allows ordinary party members to



vie for political positions, reduces the influence of candidate imposition by party big-wigs, and guarantees a credible general election. According to Section 85 (1-3) of the electoral Act 2006 and Section 87 (1) and (2) of the electoral Act 2010 (as amended), as well as the guidelines governing internal party processes, political parties are required to conduct primaries to ensure all card-carrying members have an equal opportunity to select candidates for various electoral positions and participate in decision-making and governance activities. This is essential to uphold the transparency and legitimacy of the candidate selection process for general elections and deter the imposition of candidates by political power brokers and party elites. Keefe (In Iwu, 2020: 32) outlines various forms of political party primaries such as direct, closed, open, blanket, nonpartisan, and runoff. The methods employed for party primaries can vary between democracies and different political parties. In modern democracies, party primaries are expected to be conducted in accordance with internal party rules. It is important to note that party primaries are fundamental activities for political parties in democracies, serving as a cornerstone of representative democracy.

Political Party

One of the most crucial pillars of a democratic system are the political parties (Babatunde, 2018: 16 and Omilusi, 2016). Hague and Harrop (2010: 203) defined a political party as a "political group officially recognised by a specific label that participates in elections and has the ability to nominate candidates for public office through electoral processes." Omer, Umut, and Danla (2016) referred to political parties as the "central nerve" of democracy. Omotola (2009: 612) emphasised that political parties are the primary architects of democracy. Babawale and Ashiru (2006) defined a political party as a structured group of individuals who hold similar political beliefs, opinions, principles, aspirations, and interests with the primary objective of gaining political power and utilizing it through government formation. They distinguish political parties from interest groups by highlighting that political parties aim to secure positions in office rather than influencing government officials for personal gain. Kura (2011) characterised political parties as officially recognised organisations whose members share common values, ideals, and aspirations regarding the political, socio-cultural, and economic organization of society for the collective benefit. These groups strive to realise their ideals and values by placing their representatives in government through competitive, free, fair, and transparent elections, free from harassment, intimidation, and violence. This analysis elucidates the essence and attributes of political parties in both developed and developing democracies. In established democracies, the activities of political parties adhere to the principles governing internal party democracy and party ideology. However, in developing democracies like Nigeria, political parties are still in the early stages of development, with many formed along tribal and ethno-religious lines. This viewpoint was supported by Ikechukwu (2015: 111), who suggested that political parties mirror societal, ethnic, and religious divisions in their creation. Maurice Duverger, as cited in Babawale and Ashiru (2006), categorised political parties into three types: one party, two party, and multi-party systems. The single-party model is seen as dictatorial, while the two-party or multi-party systems are viewed as more democratic. Presently, two-party or multi-party systems are more prevalent than one-party systems, which are associated with dictatorial regimes. The two-party or multi-party system allows for a wider range of choices for representatives elected by the populace. It is crucial to recognise that political



parties, unlike interest groups or other political institutions, have a primary goal of obtaining political power and forming a government. Political parties are crucial tools for democratic governance as they influence the selection of candidates for elected positions.

Democratic Governance

The concept of governance lacks a universally agreed upon definition. Different individuals or organizations interpret it differently based on their objectives. According to Ajayi (2010: 27), governance is the process and practice by which an entity organises itself to fulfil its mandate. This assertion focuses on the structures and procedures for decision-making, accountability, control, and ethical standards. It pertains to the act of governing, as well as the quality and effectiveness of governance. Agagu (2010: 39) views governance as the management of public affairs by public institutions to ensure the efficient use of resources for the well-being of citizens in a particular state. In this context, public institutions refer to the government as a key player in governance. This implies that government represents the institutions involved in governance, while governance encompasses the various methods through which social life is coordinated. Governance encompasses the actions and effectiveness of governments. Essentially, it reflects the impact and results of governmental endeavours. It requires the adept coordination of all governmental entities to uphold law and order and supply public services. Building on this understanding, democratic governance can be defined as the oversight and operation of public matters by a government that has been democratically chosen, with the aim of advancing the state's interests and promoting the well-being and progress of its constituents and society. A noteworthy aspect of this definition is that democratic governance entails the collaboration and management of both public and private sectors through communication and negotiation. Democratic governance, in terms of its operations, primarily relies on consultation and bargaining, with a strong focus on the people it serves. The significance of democratic governance lies in its ability to promote the public good, ensure accountability, and instil confidence in the government among the populace. Agagu (2010:41) has identified key principles of good governance, including participation, consensus, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and adherence to the rule of law. Rather than catering for the interests of a select few, democratic governance prioritises the collective welfare of the majority. It emphasises the protection of rights, the use of deliberative decision-making processes, and the alignment of governance with the interests of the people. Democratic governance aims to guide government policies and actions towards achieving holistic development and prosperity for citizens and society as a whole.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks utilised in this study include political elite theory and rational choice institutionalism. These theories offer a comprehensive explanation for the role of political elites and the institutional structures established to oversee the organization of credible party congresses. According to Iwu (2020: 31), classical elite theories formulated by Mosca (1939), Michels (1962), and Pareto (1968) support the notion of governance by a selected few within any political system. These theorists posit that political elites, who possess the necessary qualities for social and political authority, are the ruling class within political parties. Motivated by a desire for political power, these elites exploit the majority's perceived incapacity for self-



governance to entrench their control. In their pursuit of political dominance, political elites often manipulate the sentiments of the majority and circumvent institutional frameworks and guidelines established for the conduct of party congresses to their advantage. The rational choice institutionalism on the other hand, is a theoretical approach that examines the patterns, procedures, and functionality of institutions in relation to how individuals interact within them based on established rules. According to Shepsle (2006) and March and Olsen (2006), institutions are shaped and governed by guidelines dictating acceptable behaviour that must be followed by members of such institution. Political parties are institutions with specific codes of conduct that establish proper behaviour as a legitimate standard (March and Olsen, 2006). These rules and practices are implemented to govern human behaviour, including the conduct of party congresses.

The political elite theory and rational choice institutionalism, acknowledge that political parties have institutional frameworks or codes of standard behaviour that are considered legitimate for the conduct of party congresses. These institutional frameworks, such as party constitutions, Electoral Acts, and guidelines for party congresses, are established to regulate the interactions and activities of political parties in relation to the conduct of their congresses. This study sought to assess the level of adherence of political parties in Nigeria to the provisions of these institutional frameworks for the conduct of party congresses in the country. The study results revealed a lack of adherence by political parties to the rules and regulations governing the conduct of party congresses in the country. The study sheds light on how party leaders and machines often disregard statutory laws and guidelines for party congresses in order to impose their preferred candidates for general elections. This often leads to internal party crises, chaos, parallel congresses and primaries, and defection to other political parties. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has been unable to effectively uphold the institutional frameworks or enforce adherence to the guidelines for party congresses. This essentially indicates a pressing need to address the integrity and credibility of future party congresses.

Credible Party Congress

Despite the extensive research conducted on various aspects of party politics in Nigeria, there is a severe lack of literature regarding credible party congresses. Globally, credibility of the outcomes of party congresses hinges on the integrity and transparency of the processes involved in conducting them. Integrity and transparency are key components that are essential for ensuring a reputable party congress. According to the New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2010), integrity is defined as uprightness stemming from qualities such as honesty and consistent character. This suggests that integrity is characterised by consistency in actions, values, methods, principles, expectations, and results. To assert that a political party has integrity, therefore, requires an evaluation of whether the party behaves and conducts its congresses in alignment with the values, beliefs, and principles it professes. On the other hand, transparency entails openness in government activities and encompasses features such as freedom of expression for the citizenry (Agagu, 2010: 43). Transparency, as commonly understood in political contexts, involves openness, communication, and accountability. The understanding obtained from the above explanation is that transparency is defined as the manner in which individuals, groups, such as political parties



and government institutions, conduct their operations in a way that allows others to easily observe the actions being taken. It involves being open, honest, responsible, and accountable. In the realm of politics, transparency is utilised as a tool for ensuring public officials are answerable for their actions and to combat corruption. For instance, when a government makes its activities, programs, projects, and decisions open to the public for scrutiny, and minimises opportunities for authorities to exploit the system for their own benefit, the government is considered transparent. Conversely, if a government chooses to keep its activities, programs, projects, and decisions confidential, transparency is lacking (Agagu, 2010).

A credible party congress, therefore, must successfully meet integrity and transparency standards. In established democracies, political parties are to implement open party congresses, allowing ordinary card-carrying members to determine party primary method for selecting candidates for general elections across party lines. These prerequisites not only serve to strengthen responsive democratic governance but also act as a barrier against political godfathers and party machines manipulating the process of conducting a trustworthy party congress. The significance of integrity and transparency in party congresses cannot be overstated, as they are essential for promoting good governance, legitimizing the selection process of candidates, and preventing the imposition of candidates. Lack of openness and transparency in the operations and conduct of political parties during party congresses can result in intra-party crises, conflicts, oppression, defection of candidates to other parties, citizens' dissatisfaction with their representatives, and imposition of candidates by party leadership and machines.

In developed democracies, party congresses are regulated as a necessary component of party politics. In Nigeria, Section 85 (1-3) of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) and the guidelines for internal party democracy stipulate that political parties must conduct congresses and primaries in a manner that provides all members with an equal opportunity to elect candidates and participate in the decision-making process. This is crucial in upholding transparency, legitimacy, and credibility in the candidate selection process for general elections and in preventing the imposition of candidates by political figures or party organizations. Therefore, a credible party congress should take place in an open, just, and transparent environment where every ordinary party member is able to participate without facing any kind of coercion, harassment, or deceit. It is imperative that institutional and legal structures such as the constitution, party constitutions, the Electoral Act, and guidelines for party congresses are strictly adhered to. It is important to note that integrity and transparency are not only prerequisites for a credible party congress but are also essential for the establishment of an enduring democratic governance system.

Imperative for Credible Party Congress for Democratic Governance in Nigeria

It is evident from Nigeria's experience that the conduct of party congresses by different political parties is currently experiencing crises, leading to a decline in the delivery of democratic benefits to the populace. This unfortunate situation underscores the critical importance of conducting credible party congresses as a cornerstone of democratic governance and as a potential remedy to Nigeria's political challenges. In established democracies, the



viability, efficiency, and vitality of party politics are primarily dependent on the internal mechanisms of party congresses and party primaries. Iwu (2020); Adekeye and Ambali (2017:8); Ikechukwu (2015:113); Odigwe (2015); and Nnaji (2021:64) have all confirmed the significance of party primaries and participation of political parties in general elections. However, it is crucial to recognise that party congresses come before party primaries. It is during party congresses that political parties determine the method of party primaries to be utilised in selecting candidates for general elections. In contemporary time, the promotion of party politics and democratic governance have consistently identified party congresses as the fundamental cornerstone and prerequisite to achieve intra-party democracy within political parties. This implies that in democratic systems, the process of selecting qualified and popular candidates for general elections is primarily conducted through the organization of credible party congresses. Democracy is structured to allow political parties to hold party congresses and primaries as means of recruiting individuals and providing them with equal opportunity to engage in the decision-making process and governance. The primary objective of party congress is to ensure the election of candidates in a fair, credible, and transparent manner, ultimately leading to electoral success and promoting internal democracy within political parties. It is believed that party congresses not only enable ordinary party members to participate in decision-making, but also reduce the influence of powerful politicians who may attempt to manipulate candidate selection processes for general elections.

In Nigeria, the institutionalization of party congress is essential to produce popular candidates capable of winning general elections and implementing responsive policies that can foster good governance, national development, and legitimacy within political parties. It is imperative that party congresses adhere to the Electoral Act and political parties' guidelines for selecting candidates in order to uphold the core values of party ideology and philosophy. Credible party congresses play a crucial role in promoting democracy within and beyond political parties, and therefore should be acknowledged as a fundamental value in Nigeria's political landscape. They are fundamental in candidate selection and determine the credibility and acceptability of party primaries and general elections' outcomes. A credible party congress is not only a prerequisite but a crucial pillar of democratic governance, serving as a cornerstone of political activity in well-established democracies.

Findings

The situation surrounding party congresses in Nigeria since the country's return to democratic governance in 1999 has proven to be quite challenging and problematic. Party Congress, which is the cornerstone of party politics have been a vexed issue. Research conducted by Iwu (2020), Ayoade (2006), Ikechukwu (2015), Aiyede (2006), Kura (2011), Adekeye and Ambali (2017), Gambo (2006), Ukase (2016), Ibrahim, et al (2015), Omotola (2009), and Nnaji (2021) indicates that Nigeria has not been adhering to the rules of politics. In developed democracies, party congresses play a crucial role in determining methods of party primaries for general elections. The situation in Nigeria presents a stark contrast as party congresses have consistently deviated from established protocols. Adekeye and Ambali (2017:2) have underscored this issue by highlighting the prevalence of internal conflicts, disputes, and upheavals during party congresses in Nigeria. Rather than upholding democratic principles,



party congresses in Nigeria have been tainted with manipulation and forceful imposition of candidates for general elections. This trend has significantly undermined the integrity of party politics and democratic governance in the country.

The transition to democracy in 1999 saw the emergence of a president from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) who was handpicked through a manipulated party congress orchestrated by party leaders. The process of the party congress (national convention) that resulted in the selection of President Olusegun Obasanjo was mainly hijacked by the party oligarchy through monetary means (Ikechukwu, 2015 and Iwu, 2020). They provided financial support for the party's activities, consequently claiming ownership of the party organs and running the party with minimal involvement from members and consultation with party organs and units (Iwu, 2020: 34). Iwu revealed that the legal procedures for candidate selection were disregarded, allowing spouses, partners, children, and proxies of the affluent to secure positions at various levels. This practice was criticised by Adekeye and Ambali (2017:3), who argued that the People's Democratic Party played a significant role in generating internal conflicts due to their flawed candidate selection process. This authoritarian and unconstitutional approach contradicts democratic principles and governance.

In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, major political parties, namely the Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP), Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Labour Party (LP) the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC) have consistently engaged in activities that undermine conduct of Party Congresses. These include disregard for party constitutions, electoral laws and guidelines governing party congresses and imposition of candidates for general elections (Adekeye and Ambali, 2017:15). The outcomes of party congresses in most parties show situations where candidates of the parties were chosen based on consensus in which factions were unable to agree. This often led to defection to other political parties. Iwu (2020:34) cited a protest made by a female candidate who refused to step down in 2014 when the PDP implemented a policy of affirmation to re-elect Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan as its presidential candidate. In the same vein, Onabanjo (In Iwu, 2020: 34) demonstrated that the party congress within the APC in 2015 mirrored the scenario of the PDP. A similar occurrence transpired during the party congress and party primary held between Saturday, August 18 and Sunday, October 7, 2018. The ruling All Progressive Congress found itself embroiled in a severe internal crisis, leading to conflict between the APC governors and the party's Chairman, Adams Oshiomole, because of the inability of the party to determine at the congresses the mode of primaries, specifically direct or open primary elections (Nnaji, 2021: 70). Nnaji observed that the APC witnessed parallel primaries in Bauchi, Taraba, Cross Rivers, Rivers, Imo, Delta, and Ondo States, attributed to manipulation of the party congresses and imposition of consensus candidates by party leaders. The party congresses were marked by series of electoral irregularities, including incidents of violence and harassment of opponents. Tragically, these events resulted in five fatalities in Zamfara, two deaths and numerous injuries in Ebonyi, and one death in Lagos (Nnaji, 2021: 70).

The discord within the PDP during its national congress for the 2023 Presidential election highlighted lack of proper conduct of party congress. The party witnessed serious crisis which



led to internal factions and defection of members to other parties. Today, party congresses in Nigeria are heavily influenced by political leaders and party machines. These party big-wigs and financially powerful politicians often openly circumvent or disregard the established constitutional party procedures for party congresses. Despite having experienced twenty-five years of uninterrupted democratic rule, the state of party congress in Nigeria is very problematic and continues to leave citizens dissatisfied. Political leaders and party bigwigs have prioritised personal interests over national welfare and democratic ideals, thereby making good governance, democratic benefits and national development elusive to achieve.

The outcome of the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted with stakeholders in Ondo State party politics shows that party congresses in Nigeria have been significantly influenced by party leaders, particularly political office holders like serving Governors and the President. The interviews reveal that party congresses are frequently hijacked and controlled by the president or governor in power. Chairpersons of the PDP in Akure Ward 10 and Ward 11 emphasised that the party's constitution mandates the conduct of party congress, accreditation and participation of all card-carrying members in decision-making during congresses. All eligible registered members are supposed to elect party delegates who will then elect party candidates at primaries. They further explained that the methods for selecting party delegates are based on the party's decision at the congress. However, they noted that recent developments indicate that party leadership plays a key role in determining candidate selection through a consensus method at congresses and ratification during primaries. Similarly, the Chairmen of APC Akure Ward 6 and Ward 7 expressed concerns about the collapse of the party structure and the unbridled influence of party leaders during party congresses. They observed a trend where the Governor handpicks candidates to benefit his political allies in Ondo State. They highlighted instances where local government Chairmen and House of Assembly Members were singlehandedly chosen by the Governor for general elections. An APC Chieftain in the State observed that nomination of candidates at party congresses by party bigwigs and their endorsement as consensus candidates during party primaries is a common practice across all political parties in Nigeria. This trend is a manifestation of the political power wielded by godfathers and wealthy individuals who use their resources to ensure the candidacy of their chosen candidates.

Other interviewees, such as the Chairman of LP Akure Ward 10 and Ward 7, and APC youth and women leaders also confirmed that the imposition of candidates by party leaders is predominant in Nigerian party politics. The consensus among those interviewed is that party elites and wealthy politicians consistently dictate the conduct of party congresses and methods of selecting candidates for general elections. This practice frequently leads to internal party conflicts and the defection of members to other political parties. It is evident that, in many cases, the process of choosing delegates during party congresses is not inclusive of all party members. Party elites heavily influence the selection processes and determine which candidates will represent the party in general elections. This pattern has weakened internal party democracy, tarnished the reputation of party politics, and undermined democratic governance in Nigeria.



Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of a credible party congress as the cornerstone of democratic governance in Nigeria. To achieve this, strict adherence to the Electoral Act and political parties' guidelines for internal party democracy is essential. The Electoral Act and parties' guidelines in Nigeria, stipulate that political parties conduct party congresses to ensure all members have equal opportunity to participate and contribute to decision-making processes. This requirement is fundamental for a credible party congress. The paper emphasises the necessity of upholding integrity and transparency as the guiding principles for conducting a credible party congress. It argues that for a party congress to be deemed credible, it must take place in a free, fair, and transparent environment, free from intimidation, violence, or manipulation by party leaders and machines. The paper contends that the manipulations of party congresses will only lead to internal party conflicts and undermine the legitimacy of party politics and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The study recommends the need for reforms and the involvement of civil society organizations to mount the pressure on political parties to embrace and adhere to the Electoral Act and political parties' guidelines for conduct of open and transparent party congress system. This should be seen as a fundamental aspect of party ideology and philosophy that should guide the objectives and operations of political parties. The INEC should be completely independent and transparent in its mandate to regulate and monitor party congresses. This will guarantee credible party congress and enhance democratic governance in Nigeria.

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