

## Opposition Politics in Nigeria: A Study of South West

Aborisode Olasunkanmi

Department of General Studies, Ladoko Akintola University of Technology Ogbomoso,  
Oyo State, Nigeria

---

**Abstract:** This study delves into the nature of opposition in politics generally and specifically in South-West Nigeria. The study argues that opposition politics in South-West is a matter of policy as such if the incumbent's actions are in line with the policies of the opposition group that person will enjoy the support of the opposition. The role of opposition is sacrosanct as it is essential to the smooth running of any representative democracy. The government should therefore at all levels strive to do away with any policy that will thwart the effort of opposition because in Nigeria most of the weaknesses of the opposition parties emanate from the incumbents' hostile policies which are mostly aimed at fragmenting and weakening the opposition groups.

**Key words:** Democracy, government, opposition, policies, president, politics, representative, Nigeria

---

### INTRODUCTION

Opposition politics is an ideological stance taken by groups of politician whose party fail to win a convincing majority in an election. An ideology can be describe as a comprehensive vision as a way of looking at things as in common sense or a set of ideas proposed by the dominant class of a society to all members of that society (Bell, 2000). Ideology in its elementary form is an organized collection of ideas. It can be seen as a comprehensive vision, a perspective of reality or a way of understanding, seeing things and events or actions. An ideology serves as a mirror for the people, expressing how the people view themselves and even more importantly how they want to be seen by outsiders. Ideology embodies a system of goals and beliefs or widely held ideas by members of a society or group. Ideology, well-articulated signposts the pattern of transition of each society and the roadmap to change. The utility of ideology is more apparent and alive in its application to the political realm. Political ideology is a certain ethical set of ideals, principles, doctrines, myths or symbols of a social movement, institution class or large group that explains how society should work and offers some political or cultural blueprint for a social order. Political ideology is concerned with how to allocate power and to what ends it should be used.

In societies where democracy has taken root and become firmly consolidated, parties are delineated by their ideologies, regrettably, the situation is totally different in Nigeria. In Nigeria, political parties are not delineated ideologically. This may seem to be a product of ideological confusion or a total lack of ideology in the

development or formation of these parties. There is not much to differentiate the parties in terms of national posture it is just a marriage of strange bed fellows masquerading as political parties. The only fair exception is that of the Western part of Nigeria where political parties are gaining prominence because of some portrayal of a tinge of ideological seriousness inherited from their ancestry, the late sage Obafemi Awolowo who was popularly known as the leader of opposition in the history of Nigeria.

The issue of opposition politics in South-West Nigeria emanated from Action Group (AG), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) both founded by the late sage Obafemi Awolowo and continue by The Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN). This opposition party base their political action and programme on an ideology. Opposition ideology largely concerns itself with how to allocate power and to what ends it should be used. Some parties follow specific ideology very closely while others may take broad inspiration from a group of related ideologies without specifically embracing any one of them.

Opposition politics is inevitable in a democratic society. Genuine political opposition is a necessary attribute of democracy. How can a country be democratic without Opposition parties? How do you ensure a proper check and balance of a government under the democratic process without an Opposition? The existence of an opposition, without which politics ceases and administration takes over is indispensable to the functioning of democratic political systems. The division between government and opposition is as old as political democracy itself. In Aristotle's Athenian polity the essence of self-government was that citizens were in turn

both the rulers and the ruled. Government could alternate among different groups of citizens and the minority could seek to persuade a majority of its point of view by peaceful or political means. The age of direct democracy has been replaced with representative systems providing for periodic elections. In turn, these electoral contests are usually dominated by political parties that select their own candidates and leaders. What has not changed, however in the modern liberal-democratic society is the principle that government must rest on the consent of the governed: which means that the minority accepts the right of the majority to make decisions, provided that there is reciprocal respect for the minority's right to dissent from these decisions and to promote alternative policies.

The major aim of this study is to investigate the opposition politics in South-West Nigeria inhabited by the Yoruba. The Yoruba is one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, they occupy the Southwestern region of the country and constitute about 21-25% of the total population. The Yoruba are the second largest ethnic group next to the Hausa/Fulani of the Northern region. The study also examines the status, the role, the contributions and the weaknesses of opposition political parties in Nigeria, particularly in transitional democracies that emerged in the 1990s.

### **OPPOSITION POLITICS**

Politics can be seen in almost every place where there are more than two people. Politics refers to the power and authority provided to a group of people. Politics can be seen in many other places such as in office in government, religious institutions and in academics. It is as a result of the nature of politics that made democracy operates on the basis that there is room for choice all the way up to the selection of the government. This implies that the legislature which makes the laws for the country, must itself provide an opportunity for various views to be heard. These views should encompass not only those on the government benches but also those who are opposed to the policies underlying the ways of operation. In other words, lawfully elected representatives of the people must be able to present and discuss alternative policy options even if they are not part of the government and do not have an immediate way of making their plans succeed.

Such a political grouping within a legislature is called the opposition and commonly refers to all those parties that do not constitute the government. The leader of those parties that do not constitute the government in the legislative house becomes the opposition leader. The voters now expect that their representative will play an active role in the house whether as a member government

or a member of the opposition. The acceptance by society of a valid role for the opposition is in itself an important underpinning for the work of the legislature. It is equally important that the government accepts a role for the opposition, however small it may be in relation to the government and that the media give space to the views of the opposition in their report of the affairs of the legislative house because the opposition clearly has a very important role to play in a democratically elected legislature.

### **THE ROLE OF THE OPPOSITION**

The presence of opposition parties in any political system that tolerates them, presupposes the concept of limited government and the exercise of politics to the fullness. The idea of limited government is often associated with the political theories of John Locke and the founders of the American Republic and it means that government can and should be legally limited in its powers and that its authority depends on its observing these limitations (Waluchow, 2007). Limited government is a form of political thought and action that seeks to prevent tyranny and guarantee the liberty and rights of individuals on which free society depends. In this simplistic way, the existence of opposition parties adds legitimacy to the exercise of democratic politics through the ability of the opposition to limit absolute power.

Opposition parties sometimes structure themselves according to a shadow government or alternative cabinet to project a coherent bundle of policies to the electorate that is distinct from that of the government. The opposition parties articulate an alternative course of action from that being implemented by the government of the day and criticize its actions where they see fit. The exercise of opposition power in the legislature is in part an advertisement to the electorate for an alternative government with its own policies and ideals that is achievable through the next elections, should voters endorse it.

The opposition is expected to keep the ruling party in check all the time. Follow their every move, track every Naira that is appropriated, every bogus contract awarded. Comment on the qualifications and suitability of every political appointment made. Analyze every statement or speech made by the president or his cabinet for indications of policy. Provide alternatives where possible. Expose the wrongdoings of the ruling party to the electorate and explain how they would have done things differently. Galvanize the members of parliament who are elected on their platform to bring some sense to the law-making process.

In addition, opposition parties play an important role in the legislatures. Through the fact of their representation, opposition parties participate in the work of the committees that draft legislation. In these forums, opposition parties have the opportunity to question the wisdom and trajectory of government policy and influence the promulgation and passing of legislation while concurrently articulating alternative courses of action where they disagree with the prevailing view. Contrary to popular perception, opposition parties play an important role in committees and decisions relating to the passing of legislation which is often made through consensus.

The role of opposition parties in the exercise of accountability is important. The structure of representative politics determines that ruling party representatives support the work of the executive that is drawn from their ranks. Opposition parties who participate in representative politics in the hope of eventually winning executive power through the ballot box do not have such qualms and are generally likely to be more critical in their questioning of executive decisions. Opposition parties can make use of a variety of mechanisms in the legislature to question the executive and articulate their difference or disagreement with policies and their implementation.

The opposition has a big role to play in the present political dispensation in Nigeria. In times past, defeated politicians would jostle for ministerial appointments at the national level, oftentimes eventually defecting to the ruling party. Others would metamorphose into job contractors, parading the corridors of power for residual crumbs of the spoils of office. That is why we have never had a viable opposition. Today opposition is expected to be the top challenger of government because anybody you consider as your toughest challenger or enemy could well galvanize the adrenalin you need to get to where you need to be. If critics are viewed that way, they would be seen as the best friends of government.

In the word of Diefenbaker (1949): Opposition must fearlessly perform its functions. When it properly discharges them the preservation of the freedom is assured. The reading of history proves that freedom always dies when criticism ends. It upholds and maintains the rights of minorities against majorities. It must be vigilant against oppression and unjust invasions by the cabinet of the rights of the people. It should supervise all expenditures and prevent over-expenditure by exposing to the light of public opinion wasteful expenditures or worse. It finds fault; it suggests amendments; it asks questions and elicits information; it arouses, educates and molds public opinion by voice and vote. It must scrutinize every action by the government and in doing so prevents the short-cuts through democratic procedure that governments like to make.

Then, we should not forget the fact that the opposition has a duty to draw a distinction between opposition parties and the ruling party on key matters affecting the political economy. This is the area where the opposition must make material improvement in talking to the public and in highlighting the vast difference between opposition parties and the ruling party. The average Nigerian sees little space separating the ruling party's political and economic policies from others. This means opposition parties have not been proficient in explaining who they are and what they stand for. Opposition parties must alter the landscape of Nigerian politics. They have to remove the obstacles of region, ethnicity, religion and personality so that people can see the substantive issues more clearly. They must turn politics from the practice of who do you know to a critical inquiry into what do you know and in what do you believe. This is what should be the opposition's next great agenda.

If they do this, the public will begin to see the profound difference between the progressive Nigeria they want and the static Nigeria of the ruling party. If they do this well, the outcome of the next election will be vastly different notwithstanding any attempts to colour the outcome in a hue different from that chosen by the people. At that point, they will be able to say that the scales of Nigeria's future have shifted in favor of democracy and away from the mere semblance of democracy.

#### **OPPOSITION POLITICS IN SOUTH WEST NIGERIA**

Nigeria secured her independence in 1960. From independence to 1999 when President Olusegun Obasanjo came in and right up to his second term in office 2003 to 2007 and his successor, the Musa Yar'Adua administration, the South/West had been the bastion of opposition politics and had indeed constituted itself as the face of opposition in Nigeria. The late Chief Obafemi Awolowo was regarded as the opposition leader as he was indeed in the parliament of the First Republic and even during the military regimes between 1966 to 1979 and the Second Republic between 1979 and 1983 that produced President Shehu Shagari. With the demise of Chief Obafemi Awolowo his political lieutenants carried on the torch of his progressive politics when compared with what was dominant within the Nigeria State. They were thus able to present themselves to the Nigeria public as a better alternative to the Nigeria State (Olarinmoye, 2005).

It would seem pretty obvious to the discerning mind, however, as to why the South-West was always in the opposition rather than any other parts of the country all these past decades? The reason was that opposition

politics has been very successful is that the Awoists have succeeded in translating Awosim into the ideology of the Yoruba and have used it to create a Yoruba political identity. The success primarily is as a result of the astute leadership of the Awoists as expressed in their consumption patterns and discipline. It ensured that the amount of resources they had at their disposal was used to satisfy a large part of the needs of the Yoruba (free education, free health and roads).

The Yoruba opposition is based on ideology rather than the mere acquisition of political power at the centre. It was that ideological incompatibility that made the South-West to reject its own son in the person of late Chief Abiola in the 1993 presidential election. It was the same reason the South-West rejected another of its own son Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in the 1999 presidential election which he won. The South-West is clearly in a class of its own. The South-West only puts on its coat of opposition if the leadership at the centre did not come from the right ideological quarters. If the leadership at the centre happens to come from the right side of the political spectrum the South-West would at least temporarily discard or hang its coat of opposition. And it would appear also that the late Yar'Adua was from the right side of the political spectrum as far as the South-West was concerned in his short 2 years stint in power before death snatched him midstream. Unlike the case under Olusegun Obasanjo who is a son of the soil and was under ferocious attacks from the South-West, Yar'Adua got off quite well with some respite from the opposition throughout his reign and even commands some goodwill posthumously in the region till date. Again the reason for this is not farfetched; he had endeared himself to the South-West political mandarins by distancing himself from the policies of his predecessor. Yar'Adua's apparent antagonism was enough to earn him some respite from the nation's opposition headquarters and civil rights groups. The same is applicable to the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan, he seems to be a man after their heart as we can see it in the election that brought him in but he came from wrong party. President Jonathan was so smart to have called all the major political party into a meeting on Wednesday June 1, 2011. President Goodluck Jonathan called on political parties to join hands with his government to transform Nigeria when he met with leaders of Action Congress of Nigeria (CAN), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) and Labour Party (LP) at the Banquet Hall of the Presidential Villa Abuja.

The president, apparently sensing the strength of the opposition, chose the path of conciliation. According to him, no matter who is the president, no matter who is the governor what Nigerians are interested in is to have food on the table, there should be infrastructure, there should

be security and there should be good governance. The ruling party alone cannot make this possible. He pleaded that he would not want to run a government of opposition party or main party, he wants all to collectively run a Nigerian government, a government that will put the interest of the country at heart and work towards solving Nigeria's problems; the problems that are dear to the people.

ACN national leader and former Governor of Lagos State, Asiwaju Bola Amed Timubu who attended however, made it clear that their participation at the meeting did not in any way water down their power as opposition parties, stressing that opposition is not all about axes, cutlasses and Dane guns. He added: we did not come here to eliminate opposition and I am speaking for my own party and not for any other party. A virile opposition is essential in a democracy. Without a virile opposition, the government in power hears only its own voice and the voice of cronies, opportunists and choristers who lead every government astray. However, for effective opposition, there must be effective and dynamic political parties based on issues and ideology. Such a party must be backed by strong structures, strong leadership and disciplined followers.

#### **ASSESSMENT OF OPPOSITION POLITICS**

Opposition parties are supposed to act as shadow government by presenting superior and alternative viewpoints against a ruling party's policies and actions. In Nigeria, however, opposition political parties have often failed to do so. This is because they are seen to be weak in several areas of responsibility and therefore guilty of the same things that the parties in power are often accused of.

Some of the weaknesses associated with ruling parties in Nigeria and which opposition parties have not been able to extricate themselves from include absence of internal democracy, marginalisation of women, weak financial accountability and lack of effective representation. Others include inability to educate the populace, absence of clear cut policies and programmes as well as resorting to violence as a means of conflict resolution.

Apart from these, the grouse Nigerians hold against the parties in opposition is the tendency of dashing their hopes at critical moments. This apparent inability to rise to the demands of the day has often been attributed to the problem of vaulting ambition of leading figures in the parties who would hardly let go their ego of contesting elective offices even when it had appeared obvious that they stood little or no chance of making it on their own. It is essentially on account of this unproductive engagement by the opposition parties that they are

counted among factors working against widening the frontiers of democracy in the Nigeria. A major argument in this regard is that largely because of the individualistic disposition of the opposition, there has not been a collective and institutional check against the excesses of the party in power. By this singular failing on the part of the opposition, the electorate has regularly been denied the beauty of making alternative choice at the polls. Even, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Nigeria, earlier in the year alluded to the fact that the opposition parties have not done well enough when it underlined the major weaknesses of Nigerian political parties.

Another group named Northern Political Leaders Forum (NPLF) also testified to this. This group is well known for their vigorously campaign for power to be retained in the North in the build up to the last election. NPLF, led by Adamu Ciroma, a former Minister of Finance had in one of its meetings before the elections, reviewed the country's politics and found the opposition wanting. It claimed that the opposition had not lived up to expectation by providing viable alternative to the Nigerian people which would have arrested the country's drift to a one party state. The group also faulted the opposition for lacking the moral fiber that would have presented it as a viable alternative to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) (Emeka, 2011). The Ciroma group was apparently alluding to the disunity and absence of internal democracy in the opposition fold. Opposition politicians can improve their chances of winning executive power by fronting a single candidate but power-sharing promises among these politicians are insufficient to resolve their coordination dilemma because such promises are incredible.

That is why opposition politicians often fail to present a serious challenge to Nigerian incumbents not because they are intimidated through political violence or polarized by ethnic conflicts but mainly because they are unable to secure coordination resources in economies that are either heavily controlled, highly unstable or both. This logic suggests that an incumbent can effectively neutralize his rivals by pressuring economic elites into starving the opposition of its financing or can easily buy off any opposition politician through patronage.

Many of the opposition parties appear or become active only during an election and disappear when the election is over. It is found out that most of the opposition parties in Nigeria are established around the personalities of individuals, lack internal democracy, suffer from inter-party and intra-party conflicts have severe shortage of finance and lack strong base and experience. Their weaknesses also include bad organization and weak connection with the popular constituencies.

## CONCLUSION

Therefore, opposition must not be for opposition sake and it must be devoid of violence and must be within the globally accepted standard or best practice. The people in government are not angels; they are human and indeed Nigerians. They are liable to make mistakes and in the same way as party in opposition. The only duty an opposition party need is to provide an alternative view and this must be properly dissected, articulated and effectively communicated to the general public.

More so that from all indications, a new chapter in the body polity of Nigeria certainly has just unfurled before everybody. With a house now made up of 150 opposition members and a ruling party having 202 for all votes that would require a 2/3 majority to succeed, the opposition will continue to play the beautiful bride as the ruling party must shop for at least 38 votes from across the divide. This bigger picture clearly signals the emergence of a virile opposition which can no longer be taken for granted in the making of critical decisions for the whole country. The simple implication is that the ruling party can no longer ride roughshod over anybody or hold anyone to unnecessary ransom. Robust debate on all issues, examination of all the pros and cons and taking decisions in the best interest of all Nigerians rather than what the ruling party wants will now be the new order. That is to say that today opposition politics in Nigeria is not and should not be about individuals, religion or ethnicity but about principles, programmes and policies that would elevate the standards of living of all Nigerians and lift up the nation to where it should be.

## REFERENCES

- Bell, D., 2000. *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*. 2nd Edn., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, Pages: 393.
- Diefenbaker, J.G., 1949. *The role of the opposition in parliament*. Empire Club of Canada. (Toronto, Canada), 27 October 1949, pp: 67-74. <http://speeches.empireclub.org/60206/data?n=14>.
- Emeka, A.D., 2011. *Raising the stakes of opposition politics*. Daily Independent, Lagos. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201106291058.html>.
- Olarinmoye, O., 2005. *The politics of ethnic mobilization among the yoruba of South Western Nigeria*. Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Waluchow, W., 2007. *Constitutionalism*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2007 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2007/entries/constitutionalism/>.