Is the Party Really Over? Rethinking the Role of Conflict Transformation Theory in the Political Sphere and Political Representation

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Abstract:
This paper applies the Conflict Transformation Theory in the political sphere, as a tool for representation and for bottom-up, inclusive and locally led political processes. Aside from promoting the reduction of violence, conflict transformation theory also emphasizes the need for social justice. In increasing social justice, citizens must have access to political processes and a voice in decisions that affect them. How do these assertions translate in diverse societies with multiple interests and demands? Can the current political party structures adapt and transform to address these needs and demands? This paper will focus on the role of political parties in Nigeria and how they can contribute to true representation within the ideals of conflict transformation.

Introduction
The mid 1970s to early 1990s witnessed the burgeoning of newly democratised societies. The rapid transition to democracy was epitomised in what Samuel Huntington (1991) dubbed the “third wave”1. In Africa, the third wave was characterised by the end of dictatorial regimes and multiparty elections (Manning, 2005). The transition to democracy was hailed as a milestone in the history of the continent. Among other things, it was hoped that the transition will bring to an end, the socio-economic and political woes that had become the defining features of the continent. By creating a stable environment and institutionalising the rule of law, it was anticipated that democracy will promote the continent’s economic growth, deepen social integration and foster human development.

In the mid to late 1990s, the excitements that characterised the third wave began to wane as evidenced in the sharp decrease in the number of countries with liberal democratic systems. Given the lack of consolidation of the gains of democracy in many African countries (Diamond, 1997), previously democratic societies transited to pseudo-democracies across the continent during this period. The existence of pseudo-democracies has not abated in recent times in the light of persistent and equally unstable political climates in countries such as Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Nigeria, The Democratic Republic of Congo and Kenya. These countries became increasingly plagued by undemocratic tendencies such as vote buying, political intimidation and assassinations as well as violent ethno-regional and ethno-religious conflicts (see Mansbach & Taylor, 2012; Macharia, 2012; Scarnecchia, and Urban-Mead, 2008). Political parties, in many of these countries, were dominated by personal, regional or ethnic issues at the expense of the national agenda (Omotola, 2010:130). Including, single-party states “where there are no distinctions between the ruling political party and the main state institutions” cripple democratic processes (Kumar & Zeeuw, 2008:264).

The outcome of the foregoing is that the gains of democracy have not trickled down to the populace. Consequently, there arose some level of dissatisfaction with the suitability of democracy as a form of government and an increasing willingness on the part of the citizenry

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1 Huntington defines democratization wave as "a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period"
to support autocratic regimes (Ogude, 2012). These undemocratic tendencies have resulted in a number of military putsches in Africa in recent years, (such as the ones that have occurred in Mauritania, Mali, Guinea and Niger (Okem, 2012). There has also been an increase in the number of African countries that are deemed either as failed states – e.g. Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Chad, and Zimbabwe – (Okem, 2012) or gravitating towards becoming failed states – e.g. Nigeria - (Mansbach & Taylor, 2012).2

According to the Failed State Index3, six – Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Chad, and Zimbabwe – African countries were among the top ten failed states in 2012. Nigeria, like many newly democratic societies, has equally been faced by a number of challenges. The country is confronted by increasing violent conflicts. This situation has further been made worse by the seemingly unmitigated terrorist activities of Boko Haram, vandalisation of oil and gas installations by the Niger Delta Militant Groups, kidnappings and demands for ransom as well as increasing spates of armed robbery. Additionally, the ongoing violence, coupled with dilapidating infrastructure and high levels of corruption have stunted the country’s economic growth and reduced citizens’ quality of life.

Since independence, Nigeria has oscillated between democratic regimes and military dictatorship. Nearly half of the country’s independence era was under military rule (Guseh & Oritsejafor, 2007). In addition, the country’s history has been punctuated by violent conflicts which often have ethno-regional and religious undertones (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010). The civil war of 1967 to 1970, which pitted the Hausa-Fulani of the North against those of the Southern Igbo extraction in their bid for an independent Biafran Republic, is a veritable depiction of the country’s division. Forty years after the war, the socio-economic and political imperatives brought about the civil war have not abated. Primordial ethnic sentiments, religious affiliations and regional cleavages continue to thwart efforts geared towards the construction of shared citizenship (Agbiboa & Okem, 2013). This fragmentation of the country along various cleavages makes one wonder how long the ‘marriage of convenience’ of the various segments of the country will last. Nowhere is this division in the country more apparent than in the contestation for political positions. As a multiparty democracy, political parties in Nigeria play invaluable roles in these contestations.

Historicizing Nigeria’s Political Party Landscape

Political parties are important features of any democratic society. They play various roles ranging from the mobilisation of the masses, conceptualisation and articulation of public policies to the implementation of these policies as ruling party. In addition, political parties in liberal democratic societies ensure that political leaders are made accountable to the electorate by providing the avenues for periodic elections through which citizens choose their leadership (Jinadu, 2010). Judging from Burke’s definition (1931), political parties represents “a body of men [sic] united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principles which they are all agreed”. Underlying the definition is the notion that a political party is a form of social organisation. A political party, in this sense, is underpinned by a unique ideological standpoint which distinguishes it from others. Against this backdrop, those who vote for a particular political party conform – either overtly or covertly – to the ideology which the party promotes.

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Consequently, the success of any political party is based on the nature of its ideology – whether well or ill-informed, through which it advocates for and to the extent to which it interacts with the populace (Omotola, 2009). Although this is a strong factor in the political process, this feature of political parties has been identified as a weakness particularly in pluralistic societies. Citing Lapalombara, Omotola (2010:127) defines political parties as “a universally adopted tool for mobilizing large numbers of persons to engage in forms of political participation, voluntary or coerced that are not limited to voting”. Beyond their role in voting and elections, political parties are also involved in engaging with the population on matters that promote social interests and in the opposition of government policies and governments. Thus political parties are not only important during elections but play a pivotal role in any political landscape by bridging the gap between citizens and government. Beyond post-conflict and transition processes, political parties are also important in peacebuilding and conflict management. Informed by the foregoing, this paper is of the view that unpacking and situating their role within the conflict transformation theory will help in putting into proper perspective, their relevance to the discourse.

In Africa, the origin of political parties could be traced to the struggle against colonial rule. A number of political parties – such as the Zanu-PF in Zimbabwe, the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Mozambique Liberation Front, (FRELIMO) and the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) – were involved in armed struggles against colonial powers and the Apartheid regime. In post-colonial and Post-Apartheid Africa, these liberationist movements have reorganised into political parties participating in competitive democratic elections (see Onslow, 2007; Moran, 2006).

Similarly in Nigeria, the origin of political parties like many other African countries, dates back to the colonial period when people organised themselves into social groupings to oppose colonial rule (Jinadu, 2011). The earliest political parties in the country reflected a nationalist outlook. This is evident in the constitution of prominent political parties in this era. However this changed in post-colonial Nigeria, as political parties developed strong regional and ethnic orientations. The ethnic and regional orientation of the country’s political parties underscores the continued contestation for dominance among the various ethnic groups brought together to form Nigeria by the 1914 Amalgamation Policy of Lord Lugard. It is, therefore, no wonder that Jinadu (2011) argues that ethnicity “is a major element of the country’s social structure, which has had a profound impact on the origins and developmental trajectory of political parties in Nigeria, and on the practice of federalism in the country”.

Over the years, various political parties and social organisations in Nigeria have continued to mirror regional and ethnic sentiments. The Action Group (AG), formed in 1951, for example, was essentially a Pan-Yoruba organisation dedicated to advancing the collective interests of the Yoruba nation. Similarly, the Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC), which was previously a cultural organisation, metamorphosed into a political party dedicated to people of Hausa-Fulani extraction. This party was based on the philosophy of "One North, One Destiny and One God" (Jinadu, 2011). Other parties which demonstrated commitments to regional cleavages include the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) – which began with a national outlook but later became focused on advancing the interest of those from the eastern part of the country (Jinadu, 2011). It is perhaps worthy to note that political

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4 See Jinadu, 2011 for a comprehensive list of these parties.
parties in Nigeria’s present democratic experience have continued to manifest these regional orientations.

For example, of the five major political parties in the country, only the Peoples’ Democratic Party could boast of being a truly national party. Other parties such as the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) – with a political base in the West – with the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) – political base in the North – All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) – political base in the East – and the All Nigeria’s Peoples’ Party (ANPP) – with a political base in the North – all seem to have regional and ethnic outlook and orientation attached to their political base. However, and in view of their seeming inability to command popular support across regional and ethnic lines, Nigeria’s major opposition parties recently came together to float a mega party known as the All Progressive Congress (APC) with a view to uniting the disparate opposition parties, (Umoru, 2013). The goal of the merger is to provide a viable opposition to the Peoples’ Democratic Party.

In addition to the seeming ethnic colorations which political parties in Nigeria are attributed with, ethnic groupings in the country have also continued to promote strong regional cleavages. Pan-ethnic groups such as the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Oodua People’s Congress (OPC), the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) and the Ohanaeze Ndigbo are organisations dedicated to advancing the interests of ethnic groups in the country. While such organisations may not be a problem in the ideal case, they however, are often at the core of contestations regarding access to national resources and political positions (Vande, 2012). These contestations have pitted these organisations against one another sometimes heating up the already fragile polity.

Given the divisive nature of Nigeria’s politics and political parties, the regime of Ibrahim Babangida in 1991 formed and imposed two political parties – the National Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP) – on Nigerians (Omotola, 2009). By insisting on the existence of two political parties, it was hoped, among other things, that the ethnic and regional cleavages that often punctuate politicking in Nigeria will be greatly reduced. Unfortunately, the annulment of the 1993 generation elections – judged as the freest and fairest in the history of Nigeria – thwarted the materialisation of the aspirations of the reengineering of political parties. The annulment of the elections saw a brief interim government which was removed by a military coup led by General Sani Abacha. After about five years in power, Abacha died an untimely death under questionable circumstances.

In 1999, Nigeria made a peaceful transition to democracy. The election of the former military leader, Olusegun Obasanjo, as the country’s civilian president under the banner of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) was seen as a respite from years of brutal military dictatorship. Unfortunately the optimism never translated into the creation of a peaceful and stable democratic regime. Instead, the eight years of Obasanjo’s regime was characterised by corruption (Ojukwu & Shopeju, 2008), election-related conflicts (Ibrahim, 2007) as well as regional and ethnic violence (Kurtenbach, 2008) which stunted the country’s development.

**Overview of Party Politics and Election Related Violence in Nigeria**

Over the years, Nigerians have lived with the painful reality that election is by no means a medium for electing their political representatives (Awosusi and Fasanmi, 2011). This is as a result of irregularities/malpractice that has come to define Nigeria’s elections. Awosusi and Fasanmi, (2011:3896) define electoral malpractices as “palpable illegalities committed with a corrupt, fraudulent or sinister intention to influence an election in favour of certain
candidate(s) by means such as illegal voting, bribery, cheating and undue influence, intimidation and other acts of coercion exerted on voters, falsifications of results, fraudulent announcement of a defeated candidate as a winner with or without altering the recorded results”. Onwudiwe and Berwind-Dart (2010:5) grouped election violence into four categories: intraparty feuding, interparty clashes, electoral-events violence, and communal unrest. The uses of militia for political ends, vote-buying and intimidation are the different manifestations of election related violence. Violence and intimidation negatively impact on elections as they contribute to low voter turnout thus infringing people’s right to choose their representative. In some instances, low voter turnout has been used as an opportunity to stuff ballot boxes in favour of a political candidate.

In Nigeria, election periods are often prone to violent conflict. This is because politicking in the county, now construed as contestations for a slice of the ‘national cake’, are carried out by vested interests that use violence as a means of achieving their political ends. The huge return on investment in political offices, seem to have incentivised the emergence of a new elitist group popularly called political godfathers (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011; Olarinmoye, 2008). In a bid to ensure that they get their candidate into political office in order to get their return on investment, political godfathers recruit thugs and arm them with sophisticated weapons to intimidate and assassinate political opponents as well as rig elections. High unemployment has ensured that young energetic people become easy targets as recruits to be used as political thugs to prosecute the wishes of political leaders (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010:3).

Consequently, and due to the vested interest of godfathers and politicians, any other individual who declares him/herself as an aspiring political leader can easily become a target of assassination (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010). Rather than using the ballot box to determine who gets to occupy political office, aspirants assassinate their opponents or any one they perceive as a threat. This clears the way for them to emerge victorious in the polls. This practice creates a culture of fear thus preventing well-meaning aspirants from venturing into politics. Consequently, Nigeria’s political elite is characterised by a group of thugs who are motivated only by self-serving interests (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011). It is therefore not surprising why corruption, intimidation, and violence have become normal process of elections and electioneering in Nigeria.

The foregoing has created a dangerous precedent where politics in Nigeria has become a “do or die” affair – a term popularised by Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Nigerian president in the build-up to the 2007 elections. Given this warped notion of election, political aspirants and parties resort to all forms of illegality to ensure that they are declared winners at the polls. It is therefore no surprise that elections in Nigeria, such as the ones in 2007, featured widespread disregard to non-disclosure of secrecy in balloting, vandalization, stealing, snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes by political thugs for their candidates and party stalwarts and the alteration of results during collation process” (Iduh, 2011).

It is again worth noting that the Nigerian political sphere has over the years been characterized by a number of high profile politically related assassinations. Such high profile cases of assassinations include Barnabas Igwe the attorney general of the federation at the time of his assassination, the Chairman of the Nigerian Bar Association Onitsha Branch and

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5 Awosusi and Fasanmi (2011:3895), “Do or die” refers to the readiness of a politician to use all means, any means including diabolical, manipulative, violent and criminal means to ensure victory in an election.”
his wife who were assassinated on September 1, 2002, Prophet Eddie Okeke who was murdered in November 2000, Chief Ezedumegwu G. Umegwu G. Okonkwo a chairman of a local government was killed in February 2001, and Dr. Ayodeji Daramola suffered a similar fate (Patrick, 2006). Another high profile political assassination is Marshall Harry – the national Vice Chairman for the South-South Zone of All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) – who was murdered at his home on March 5, 2003 (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

In addition, election related violence is contributing to the proliferation of light and heavy weapons. In preparing for elections, political aspirants invest heavily in the amassing of weapons, such that one may be forced to think they are preparing for a military offensive. For instance, In the build-up to the general elections in 2011, the country’s security officers in October 2010 “intercepted thirteen shipping containers of smuggled weaponry at the Lagos port in what many analysts consider an ominous portent for this year’s election season” (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010:4). Such weapons, after elections, become readily available for use by terrorists groups, armed robbers and kidnappers thus increasing human insecurity in the country.

Vote rigging and election related violence are also not new features of the Nigerian political terrain. A relevant case in point was the 1965 elections in the Old Western Region, where electoral officers were reported to have colluded with a certain political party, with close affinity with the government and rigged elections result in its favour (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011:131). The subsequent dissatisfaction with the outcome of the rigged elections produced an unstable political space which brought about the 1966 military putsch led by General Kaduna Nzeogwu. The 1979 and the 1983 elections were also not much different from that of 1965. Again, the dissatisfaction with the outcomes of these elections created the unfavourable political climate which culminated in the military takeover that year (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011:131).

At the heart of political violence in Nigeria is the multi-ethnic composition of the country. Mono-ethnic political parties, grounded on ethnic ideology, often exacerbate social fractures in multi-ethnic society (Reilly, 2006). In such societies, politicking rather than being issue-based is underpinned by ethnic differences. By mobilising voters along ethnic lines, such a political party “has a centrifugal effect on electoral politics, thereby aiding extremists and heightening ethnic tensions” (Reilly, 2006:811). In addition, these political parties are often exclusive thus becoming breeding grounds for the development dislike for other ethnic groups. Any political party which campaigns and succeeds in promoting ethnic sentiments have a tendency to increase ethnic fractures since their victory is dependent on the nature and extent of fractures among the different ethnic groups.

Consequently fractures amongst ethnic groups assure political parties of the allegiance of their ethnic groups. In this regard, they are also known for making “powerful emotional appeal to issues of identity, history and survival” (Reilly, 2006:813). It is therefore not surprising that in Nigeria political elites and civilians form alliances “along expedient lines of convenience, ethnicity, and religion” (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010:22). As a result, leaders are elected not because of their pedigree but because of a sense of primordial attachment. While the above holds true for many instances, it is worth pointing out that ethnic political parties are not necessarily divisive or necessarily exclusive. In a federation like Nigeria, the formation of political parties along ethnic/regional lines could act as a means of including minority groups in a coalition government.
Unlike mono-ethnic parties, Reilly (2006) argues that multi-ethnic parties\textsuperscript{6} tend to promote national integration. They do this by appealing to voters from different ethnic backgrounds. Through this, electioneering itself becomes a channel of social cohesion by promoting a culture of tolerance. In multi-ethnic political parties, however, people from different ethnic backgrounds can work together in order to widen the party’s political base. This has the capacity to douse ethnic tensions that would otherwise degenerate into violent conflict.

\textbf{Conflict Transformation Theory}

As a response to conflict, conflict transformation focuses on addressing the context, content and relationships within a conflict situation. Conflict transformation, as defined and proposed by Lederach (2003:14), seeks “to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships”. Broadly speaking, conflict transformation is therefore tasked with: reducing violence, increasing justice and restoring fragile relationships (Lederach, 1995: 23). In reducing violence, the issues, content and underlying patterns and causes need to be addressed; and in increasing justice, people must actively participate in the political process and be given the space to voice their opinions on issues that affect them (Mischnick, 2007:60). In restoring relationships, the interactions within the society and fragile relationships between groups are positively enhanced as they are possible triggers for conflict. For conflict transformation, peacebuilding involves processes and efforts to transform conflict towards more peaceful and sustainable relationships.

Conflict transformation has also been defined as “actions and processes which seek to alter the various characteristics and manifestations of conflict by addressing the root causes of a particular conflict over the long term” (Austin, \textit{et al} 2004:464). Thus it is important to understand the role and importance of political parties in these actions and processes, and how they can contribute to the root causes and escalation of a conflict. In totality, conflict transformation therefore aims to change the structures, contents and contexts of conflict. In situations where there is “a lack of clear rules and systems for conflict management” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:49), (and conflict transformation), conflicts can worsen and become violent.

Transformation also involves the “restructuring of social institutions as well as a redistribution of power from high-power groups to low-power groups” (Botes, 2003). Groups include government, political parties, warring groups and other key groups in that specific society. The redistribution of power douses tensions related to contestations over the control of state machinery and resources – factors which triggers conflict. Political parties are important actors in this process as they contribute to these power contestations.

An examination of conflict transformation theory against the backdrop of how political parties function currently underscores their failure in contributing to healthy and burgeoning democracies and the prevention of conflict. Citing, Nafziger \textit{et al} (2000), Clements (2004:6b) notes that political parties feature in already fragile societies that are characterised by: “government exclusion and persecution of distinct social groups; rule by kleptocrats or entrenched minorities and where there is weak government legitimacy.” Political parties have a tendency to become immersed in a process where their interests and specific personal

\textsuperscript{6} By multi-ethnic party, we refer to political parties whose purpose of existence is not based on promoting the values and needs of a single ethnic group but that of the broader society.
agendas supersede the interests of the wider population. In such cases ethnic interests and agendas trump party ideologies leading to a breakdown of party structures and intra- and inter-party relations.

Consequently intra-party relations are very poor such that intra-party conflicts have become permanently irreparable or non-existent as in the case of Nigeria (Omotola, 2010:142). An offshoot of poor inter-party relations is the prevalence of competition, actions and behaviours that causes tensions in society as the wider population is drawn into these identity wars. In Nigeria, party politics has seen a shift of the agenda from ideological discussions and reflections to that of a zero-sum competition. This is evident in the fierce competition for victory at the polls alluded to earlier on in this paper. Against this backdrop, political parties have become more of a “liability than an asset to the common man and the system at large” (Omotola, 2010:141).

Infighting within political parties also has the capacity to negatively distort their image within the broader society. Numerous cases of in-fighting for political power and leadership positions within political parties have been documented. For instance in the United States in 2010, reports of in-fighting between the Democrats and Liberals over positions of leadership within the US Congress emerged. According to the online news reports, complaints of backstabbing, bullying and secret deals with regards to decisions on various appointments surfaced within Germany’s Pirate Party. In Nigeria, the PDP has faced its own challenges of in-fighting in the form of power struggles between various individuals in 2010, thus leading to the suspension of members who were “challenging the party’s leadership over a lack of openness in selecting candidates for political office.” Inter-party conflicts has created an “image of political parties being too consumed by the scramble for power (party and state power) and less concerned about the welfare of the people (its members and society at large)” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:14). Rather than engage in constructive activities, members of political parties are sometimes enmeshed in a mortal struggle over the control of party’s machinery. Such conflicts take more dangerous dimensions when they involve the relationship with other political parties. In many scenarios, consolidation of power and resources by one long standing ruling party creates an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian government which provides an opportunity for impunity and the creation of armed factions to challenge government. As a result, the failure of political parties to adequately represent the interests of the population creates a large deficit in any democratic process and in times of conflict many groups are forced to rely on alternate and informal structures to push their agendas forward. In some cases, these structures utilise violence as a form of expression especially in situations of gross injustice.

Given that political parties are at the heart of electioneering, we argue that locating political parties in peace-building exercise is quintessential to the attainment of a peaceful and democratic society. This effort will not only ensure that political parties are involved in the peace building process but also become advocates of peace thus preventing the spate of

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election related violence that has come to characterise the political landscape of many African countries.

**Political Parties as Agents of Conflict Transformation**

Broadly speaking, conflict transformation plays out through processes of “nation-building, national reconciliation, healing, change agentry and social transformation” (Botes, 2003:3). In addition, it promotes non-violence, a just society, right relationships and advances the importance of dialogue. Political parties have a major role in applying these principles and tenets especially in divided societies.

Political parties are historically known as important element of any democracy. As a result of their function which includes “representation, interest aggregation and articulation, recruitment of electoral candidates and the formation of government” (Hoove & Schobalt, 2008:16), they are an integral part of any democratic society. On that basis, their “role cannot be duplicated by any other civil society or private organisation” (Hoove & Schobalt, 2008:16). In spite of their relevance, political parties are the “least trusted institutions” in the world according to the Global Barometer Surveys 10 (Nordlund, 2008:300). According to the Ederber, and Tjernstrom, (2006), this lack of trust in political parties by the public is because the former are perceived as corrupt, elitist, and unresponsive to the needs of members and the general public from which they garner support. As Matlosa & Shale, (2008:14) argue “the rise of other formations like civil societies as alternative forms of mobilisation and expression have decreased trust and reliance on political parties and “shifted the arena of political engagement beyond political parties”. Furthermore, political parties are on the decline globally due to a myriad of factors: which includes failed election promises, corruption, challenge in mobilising numbers, and poor public perception of political parties (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:13-14). This global decline is manifested in the decline in overall party memberships and poor support of the electoral process by citizens.

In a country like Nigeria, violent conflicts have surfaced in the form of identity conflicts or electoral violence. Identity conflicts in Nigeria have been mainly ethno-religious in nature. Ethno-religious violence emerges when structures contribute to social and economic inequities and to the systematic exclusion of ethnic or religious groups from participating in public policy decisions (Schirch, 2008:7). Electoral violence on the other hand has been defined as acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process, or that arises in the context of electoral competition (Ettang, et al 2011: 1). Another definition notes electoral conflict and violence as any random or organised act or threat to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail, or abuse a political stakeholder in seeking to determine, delay, or to otherwise influence an electoral process (Ettang, et al 2011:1).

Although political parties sometimes actively create and exacerbate these forms of violence, they do have a strong role to play in positively transforming the causes and nature of this violence. In linking political parties to the conflict process, their ability to mobilise, unify and represent interests makes them a formidable force in managing divided societies (Reilly, 811). Against this backdrop, the international community has been involved in strengthening political parties through the following avenues: organizational development, ensuring effective campaigns, promotion of multi-party dialogue, and improved performance in parliament (Reilly & Nordlund, 2008:272). The next section explores the role of political

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10 Please see [http://www.globalbarometers.org/]
parties as agents of conflict transformation within three core elements: reduction of violence, increasing justice, and resolving human relationships.

Reduction of Violence
Political parties, according to Reilly (2006:811), are “intimately linked to the rise and fall of conflict in ethnically plural societies”. Looking at the case of Nigeria, political parties are popular for grossly influencing the elections process and more specifically incessant rigging during elections (Omotola, 2010:138). Thus, they are a major cause of violence that takes place during elections. Their role in increasing tensions and providing resources for conflict needs to be reversed in order to contribute positively to societal development.

In reducing violence, political parties must engage in a process of understanding the root causes of any conflict. This requires an active and on-going engagement with the citizens to understand the needs and demands on the ground and channel it into policy. Cross ethnic party voting has been identified as a form of preventing violent conflicts (Miall, 2004:8). This is why Reilly (2006:811) notes that ethnically based parties are usually inclined towards representing the interests of specific groupings. Thus ethnic parties are direct contributors to violent conflict (Reilly, 2006:813). In attempting to address these, political parties must actively be multi-ethnic and cater to all forms of identities. Furthermore, political parties must engage warring groups in finding peaceful and sustainable solutions to any form of conflict. This responsibility must not be solely left to government or civil society.

Political parties, in engaging with civil society, can participate in conflict prevention strategies and support early warning and early response processes. For the most part, the relationships between civil society and political parties are weak and non-existent particularly within the context of elections (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:23). This could be attributed to the existence of strong mutual distrust between political parties and civil societies. Furthermore this relationship is non-existent especially when it comes to the broader engagement of civil society and political parties. In aspects of conflict and prevention, political parties must publicly denounce violence of all forms and ensure that they do not engage in “violence or intimidation, or language or action which might lead to violence or intimidation” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:41). South Africa has made an important stride in this regard whereby parties have committed to not allowing “weapons to be carried or displayed at political meetings, marches, demonstrations and voting stations” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:41).

Political parties must not be involved in violence but instead maintain and portray peaceful agendas at all times. Kumar and Zeeuw (2008:281) propose that party rules and regulations should be developed and implemented through the conflict prevention lens. Their ideologies, actions, platforms and agendas must be conflict sensitive and their approach cognisant of the realities on the ground. Furthermore, they can “identify the rules and regulations that might aggravate existing tensions and present alternative solutions for the consideration of the executive and legislative bodies” (Kumar and Zeeuw, 2008:281).

Efforts to mitigate and prevent election related violence must be started sufficiently ahead of elections, however in many cases these start too late. Political parties must be involved in conflict prevention education, fostering unity, and calling for nonviolence before, during and after elections. Furthermore they can contribute to creating forums of dialogue and engagement with citizens to ensure that their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed in order to so as to avoid any election violence. Political parties must embrace a culture of non-violence and in-fighting must be avoided within parties. The portrayal of
constant violence, divisions, and in-party fighting will reflect poorly on society. Intra-party dialogue becomes useful in reducing violence as it creates opportunities for political parties to sit together and resolve sources of intra-party violence. This requires developing conflict resolution and mediation channels within political parties and ensuring that internal processes are transparent and inclusive.

Political parties can benefit from reducing violence through various means. For instance, they can be assured of a stable and peaceful environment before, during and after elections which will allow them to effectively campaign and promote their agenda. Furthermore, their constituents and party workers are protected from attack or harm during elections and polling stations will be safer which will in turn increase voter turnout.

**Increasing Justice**
Conflict emerges when people feel they have been wronged or are disadvantaged and in response, confront such a system. Political parties, especially in divided, post-conflict societies are expected to “promote maximal inclusiveness and representation of various groups”. (Hoove and Schobalth, 2008:11). In increasing justice, political parties must call for and actively engage in a process that requires the involvement of the population. This is why political parties have been referred to as “critical agents for political education, socialisation and mobilisation” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:6). Their influence cannot be undermined and they are important in driving and shaping the political landscape of a country. The attitudes and values of political parties contribute to the national political culture which in turn could be positive or negative (Matlosa & Shale, 2008: 6).

Furthermore, there needs to be a shift from one-party politics to a functioning multi-party system. In increasing justice, weaker political parties must be strengthened to actively engage in the political process. One-party systems tend to create a fragile and weak political system where conflicts can easily erupt. In this scenario, corruption, the incessant abuse of power and access to state resources by one political party creates a fragile and weak system.

Ideally political parties should be relied upon to “making government accountable by effectively implementing party policies and exercising control over government administration” (Omotola, 2010:129). In doing so, programmes and measures must be put in place by political parties to ensure that government is addressing the needs of the population regardless of their identity. Its role therefore must go beyond pushing its agenda during elections to actively engaging the political process on an on-going basis to improve efforts at social, political and economic marginalisation. While citing Reilly, Omotola (2010:129) notes that political parties should “mediate between the demands of the citizenry on the one hand and the actions of the government on the other, aggregating the diverse demands of the electorate into coherent public policy”. This requires an on-going engagement in the public arena and more importantly in countries undergoing transition or facing potential conflicts.

On many occasions, political parties have “struggled to manage societal conflicts, failed to deliver public goods and promote development” (Reilly in Omotola, 2010:130). In ensuring access and inclusive participation of all sectors of society, Kumar and Zeeuw (2008:281) propose an exploration of a wide range of rules and regulations that “create positive incentives for political parties to build multi-party coalitions and to include women, ethnic minorities, and members from remote and distant regions within their organization”. This might contribute to the inclusion of all sectors of society (including women, youth, and ethnic/religious minorities) in the political process and an assurance that their voices are
being heard. Spaces through which these groups can participate in decision-making must be created. This is of paramount importance in Africa where youth are largely unemployed and have been known to actively engage in conflict. Efforts to include them in political decision-making and ensuring that their voices are being heard will be of extreme importance in conflict prevention.

Political parties must become as they were designed; platforms through which the interests of the people are aggregated and presented to government. Nordlund (2008:303) concludes that “regardless of electoral and party system design, every citizen must be ensured participation, representation and non-discrimination”. Public outreaches become very important avenues through which political parties can engage more closely with the population and help to transform conflicts. Furthermore, political parties “need to maintain the links even beyond the elections by ensuring regular interaction with the people” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:39). In increasing its access to the population, political parties should ensure that “they interact with members, have offices at the provincial, district and local levels, hold public hearings with citizens, and ensure that party information is easily accessible” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:39).

Political parties are ideally meant to represent and channel the interests of the population to become policy. Representation could be defined as “the capacity of political parties to respond to and articulate the views of both members and the voters” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:5). Their roles, especially during elections, range from “political representation, expression of people’s demands through interest articulation and aggregation and the simplification and structuring of electoral choice” (Omotola, 2010:129). As Omotola (2010:128) posits, political parties in Africa have not lived up to their definitions as they have failed to sufficiently represent various groups in society but have been known to push forward agendas of “neo-patrimonialism and violence”. Ethnic parties have emerged such that they “mobilize people on the basis of ethnicity rather than a cross-cutting ideology, and their goals often centre on the narrow interests of an ethnic group(s) rather than broader-based societal interests” (Kumar & Zeeuw, 2008:265). This has seen efforts by governments in countries such as Afghanistan and Rwanda banning the emergence of parties that promote specific ethnic interests, although this strategy has however been criticised in Rwanda as a hindrance to the emergence of solid opposition parties (Kumar & Zeeuw, 2008:269). Because of this, the perception of political parties have been tainted and in many cases they are seen or perceived as oligarchic, power-hungry and devoid of interest of their members or the communities they supposedly “represent” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:14).

In contributing efforts to increase justice, political parties are assured that their ethnic groups will benefit from the political process. This is due to the fact that institutions will become accountable and inclusive in the policies and decisions that affect the population. Political parties can then become less “ceremonial” but become active checks and balances on government.

**Resolve Human Relationships**

Poor relationships between different groups have been identified as a catalyst for conflict and will hinder efforts at establishing peace and stability (Lederach cited in Miall, 2004:8). Taking cognizance of this, Omotola (2010) observes that political parties are avenues for “national integration and consensus building especially in plural societies like Nigeria” (Omotola, 2010:125, 128). Unfortunately, the citizens’ trust in political parties has weakened considerably and this has brought about declining membership rates, weak support during elections and low voter turn-out. This trust has been further weakened by the failure of
incumbents to meet election promises. The current decline in political parties could also be attributed to their “bureaucratised political machines concerned only with contestations for state power with no sustained mobilisation and activism of their grass-roots members” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:14). Political parties must therefore work actively to repair its image (real or perceived) in society. This involves developing positive inter-party and intra-party relationships.

Furthermore, civic education is a useful tool in resolving relationships. Civic education focuses on exposing citizens to election processes, the principles of democracy, promote non-violence and build unity during elections. Civic education is supposed to be undertaken by various stakeholders, including political parties. Yet, political parties “often consider this not to be their role, but that of the election management bodies and civil society organisations (CSOs)” (Matlosa & Shale, 2008:23) It is rather rare for political parties to engage in civic education and the challenge is that efforts by other actors to undertake these activities are limited by lack of financial resources. Thus a huge gap exists in that process. Recognising the values of civic education, Matlosa & Shale (2008:23) argue that it is “politically costly for parties to fail to undertake civic and voter education”.

This paper argues for the need for efforts to be made towards transforming the image of political parties including the need for the improvement in the relationship between the population and political parties. As Omotola (2010:139) notes “political parties are not sufficiently rooted in any society which allows party financiers to hijack the parties for personal interests”. To this end, the paper advances the need for concrete steps to be put in place towards ensuring that political parties with solid agendas and platforms are created. What has emerged has been the creation of political parties by financiers and entrepreneurs with the sole purpose of accessing political and economic resources (Kumar & Zeeuw, 2008:265). Consequently, such political parties rely on clientelism and intimidation in order to remain in power. This creates a culture that leads to the pilfering of state resources.

Resolving human relationships and building consensus within society should be of importance to political parties as it lessens fractions within such a highly competitive process. Furthermore, stronger inter- and intra-party relationships will contribute to a vibrant and positive political environment. Ultimately political parties in ensuring the loyalty of their constituents must attempt to create a positive and warm image.

Conclusion and Recommendations
Ideally, political parties are pillars of democracy and have a huge role to play in ensuring political stability (Omotola, 2010; Hoove & Scholtbach, 2008). Nigeria’s political history has contributed to the evolution of political parties as representatives of specific personal or group interests and not that of society as a whole. As of 2010, Nigeria had over fifty registered political parties, which ideally should create an avenue for a deeper and more participatory democracy, however the obverse seems to be the case (Omotola, 2010). Its political parties have evolved more as representing and consolidating specific ethno-regional interests. This has made them become very weak actors in promoting democracy and mitigating conflicts in Nigeria and regrettably, political parties in Nigeria, through their activities, have become rather anti-politics.

This paper submits that political parties in multi-ethnic and religious societies must evolve to embrace and deal with the differences that emerge in such societies. Ideological differences, political competition as well as wide economic disparities amongst groups create a highly
tensed and conflicting environment. Political parties can either contribute to deepening these
differences or try to bridge the gap among the citizens and between the governed and
government. Political parties are encouraged to not only focus on promoting their agenda but
also devising peaceful means of doing so. In addition, the engagement and involvement of
political parties should be viewed as not only necessary during and after elections but should
be on-going, particularly in countries with nascent or transitory democracies.

As Reilly (2006:812) earlier suggests, political parties need to explore and devise strategies
through which multi-ethnic parties can be created and sustained. This is necessary because
any political party which embraces multiple identities and political systems that encourage
and foster multi-identity parties ultimately help in the reduction of violence and restoration of
relationships in divided societies. It is important that the authoritarian legacies that have
contributed to one-party systems over time be removed and measures put in place to shape
multi-parties. Added to this is the general consensus among scholars that “there is a need to
build broad-based, aggregative, and multi-ethnic political parties in consolidating fragile
multi-ethnic states” (Reilly, 2006: 813).

Consequently, developing internal codes of conducts that govern the internal relations of
political parties is essential so that they embrace and foster broad based and multi-ethnic
arrangements. Furthermore there is a need to develop a system that ensures transparency in
the funding sources of political parties. This is capable of eliminating or reducing the use of
state resources to sustain the status of a dominant political party at the expense of the
development of meaningful opposition.

Political party leadership are very important in promoting a culture of nonviolence,
embracing diversity and restoring relationships within the party, across parties and within the
society at large. Sadly, the elites tend to avoid interests in initiatives such as inter-party
dialogues and party cooperation (Hoove & Schobalt, 2008: 16). These attitudes need to be
changed and parties must embrace the culture of dialogue. In promoting accommodation,
Reilly (2006:816) states that campaigning politicians must “reach out and attract votes from
ethnic groups other than their own”. Beyond this, there is a need for political leadership that
is “nationalistic, detribalized and sacrificial” (Omotola, 2010:144) in which the interests of
society at large becomes paramount.

Transforming political parties to become effective peace builders requires an “explicit
intervention in the party system” (Reilly, 2006:823). This calls for continuous engagement
and renewal of their agendas and platforms to address the root causes of conflict and
contribute to their resolution. In achieving this, the institutionalization of political parties
needs to be revisited and improved. This requires a reworking of their “organization,
discipline, internal democracy and cohesion” (Mainwaring and Zoco cited in Omotola,
2010:129). Unless these issues are prioritized, it is our belief, and as also similarly expressed
in Omotola (2010:129) that “political parties will become “mere formalities” and ceremonial
features at best. According to Reilly (2006:823), the capacity of political parties to effectively
manage (and in this case transform) conflict, can only be determined by “the nature of the
party system in a country and the structure of individual parties”. To this end, political parties
should be re-engineered and reconstructed to reduce violence, increase justice and resolve
relationships rather than endanger them.

In re-engineering themselves to become agents of conflict transformation, political parties
must be informed and sensitive of their role in exacerbating conflict and contributing to
divided societies. Furthermore they must be aware of and understand the root causes of conflicts in society and adopt measures through which they can address these or propel government and the security sector to address these. Stronger coordination between political parties and civil society is important in adequately and efficiently representing the interests of the population. Civil society organisations as representatives of the people are very important in helping to rebuild the relationship and bridge the gap between political parties and citizens. They can be relied upon for mobilisation, sensitisation, and educating the population. Such collaboration is beneficial in the long run and will ensure that the checks and balances on the ruling party or government are tougher.

Improving relations within and amongst political parties is also very critical in ensuring that they reach their potential. Multi-party dialogues are important in this process. The lack of trust amongst political parties and fragmentation amongst political parties impedes any efforts at a healthy political landscape. With the absence of trust comes an “unwillingness to share ideas and seek consensus and mutual understanding on a wide range of issues”. According to Hoove and Schobalt (2008:16), all these are detrimental to a rich multi-party system. This paper therefore advocates for the development of a common agenda sufficient enough to address causes of conflict and find avenues to successfully resolve them. A culture of trust and mutual understanding amongst political parties is critical to the success of these relations.

In conclusion, political parties wield importance in Nigeria and their influence must be channelled appropriately to actively and constructively meet the needs of citizens. It is advised that the character of the Nigerian state which allows for the centralisation of power and resources needs to be revisited. The competition for the centre has trickled down to affect the very nature and make-up of political parties in Nigeria. To this end, it is hoped that a decongestion of the centre will help in addressing some of this deficit and ultimately the embracement and application of conflict transformation in Africa as a whole will in turn produce stronger and more stable countries and equally contribute to the economic growth of the continent.
References


