

# Internal Party Conflict and Democratic Governance in Nigeria, 2015–2022

JIM ASONNAM (PH.D)

*Department of Political Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt-Nigeria*

***Abstract-*** Political parties play a central role in democratic governance by serving as vehicles for political participation, leadership recruitment, and policy articulation. However, the functioning of political parties in Nigeria has been characterized by persistent internal conflicts that undermine party cohesion and democratic governance. This study examines the impact of internal party conflict on democratic governance in Nigeria between 2015 and 2022. The study adopts David Easton's systems theory as its analytical framework and employs an ex-post facto research design using qualitative methods. Data were obtained from secondary sources such as academic journals, books, newspapers, and official electoral reports, while participant observation served as a supplementary source of primary information. Findings reveal that the absence of internal party democracy, political opportunism, and leadership struggles are major drivers of internal party conflict in Nigeria's major political parties, particularly the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC). The study further reveals that such conflicts weaken political institutions, distort governance processes, drain state resources, and undermine democratic consolidation. The paper concludes that strengthening internal party democracy and institutional discipline within political parties is essential for sustaining democratic governance in Nigeria. It recommends returning decision-making authority to party members, promoting internal discipline, and reducing judicial interference in party affairs.

**Keywords:** Political Party, Internal Party Conflict, Democratic Governance, Nigeria, Political Opportunism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Political parties are fundamental institutions in modern democratic systems. They serve as channels for political participation, platforms for leadership recruitment, and vehicles for the articulation and aggregation of societal interests. In democratic systems, political parties also play a critical role in mobilizing citizens for elections and ensuring accountability in governance (Dahl, 1971).

In Nigeria, political parties have historically played important roles in shaping democratic processes. Party politics in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial era when the Clifford Constitution of 1922 introduced elective principles into the political system (Jinadu, 2011). This development led to the formation of the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), widely recognized as the first political party in Nigeria. Subsequent parties such as the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), Action Group (AG), and Northern People's Congress (NPC) emerged and dominated Nigeria's early political landscape.

However, Nigerian political parties have often been characterized by intense internal conflicts, factional struggles, and leadership crises. These internal conflicts have historically undermined democratic stability and contributed to the collapse of democratic experiments in the country. The First Republic collapsed partly due to intra-party conflicts within major political parties, particularly the crisis within the Action Group in the early 1960s (Nnadozie, 2005).

Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria has continued to experience internal party conflicts. The two dominant political parties in the Fourth Republic—the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC)—have faced recurring leadership disputes, factional divisions, and political opportunism. These internal crises often extend beyond party structures and negatively affect governance and political stability.

The period between 2015 and 2022 represents a critical phase in Nigeria's democratic development. During this period, Nigeria witnessed a historic transfer of power from the ruling PDP to the APC following the 2015 general elections. However, internal conflicts within both parties continued to

shape political developments and governance outcomes across the country.

This study therefore examines the relationship between internal party conflict and democratic governance in Nigeria between 2015 and 2022.

## II. CONCEPT OF POLITICAL PARTY

Political parties are central institutions in representative democracy. Scholars have defined political parties in different ways depending on their theoretical perspectives and analytical focus.

Lemay (2001) defines a political party as a group of politically active individuals organized to capture governmental power through elections. Similarly, Shale and Matlosa (2008) describe a political party as an organized group of individuals who share similar political objectives and seek to influence public policy by winning elections.

In the Nigerian context, the Electoral Act (2022) defines a political party as any association of persons whose activities include canvassing for votes in support of candidates for election and which is registered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

Despite variations in definitions, most scholars agree that political parties perform several critical functions in democratic systems. These include leadership recruitment, political socialization, interest aggregation, policy formulation, and electoral competition (Maiyo, 2009; Jinadu, 2011).

Political parties also act as bridges between the government and citizens. Through their manifestos and policy platforms, they provide voters with alternative visions of governance and development.

However, the effectiveness of political parties largely depends on their internal organization and democratic structures. Parties that lack internal democracy often experience internal conflicts that weaken their organizational capacity and undermine democratic governance.

## III. INTERNAL PARTY CONFLICT

Conflict is an inevitable feature of human interaction. In political organizations such as political parties, conflict often arises from competition for power, resources, and influence.

Internal party conflict, also known as intra-party conflict, refers to disagreements and disputes among members of the same political party that threaten party unity and cohesion (Atelhe et al., 2019).

According to Okoli (2001), intra-party conflict occurs when factions within a political party challenge the decisions or authority of party leadership. Such conflicts may lead to factionalization, defections, and the formation of splinter groups.

One of the major causes of internal party conflict is the absence of internal party democracy. Internal party democracy refers to the level of participation and fairness in decision-making processes within political parties, particularly in candidate selection and leadership recruitment (Randull & Svasand, 1999).

When party leaders manipulate internal processes or impose candidates, aggrieved members often challenge such decisions, leading to internal conflicts.

## IV. POLITICAL OPPORTUNISM AND PARTY CONFLICT

Political opportunism is another factor that contributes to internal party conflict in Nigeria. Opportunism refers to the pursuit of personal or group interests at the expense of collective principles and democratic norms (Okoli & Orinya, 2014).

In Nigeria's political environment, political competition is often driven by access to state resources rather than ideological commitments. As Joseph (1991) argues, Nigeria's political system is characterized by prebendal politics in which political offices are used for personal enrichment and patronage distribution.

This situation creates intense competition for political positions and fuels internal conflicts within political parties.

## V. DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Democratic governance refers to a system of governance based on principles such as participation, accountability, transparency, and rule of law (Council of Europe, 2022).

Democratic governance involves more than periodic elections. It requires institutions that ensure citizen participation in decision-making and promote accountability in public administration (UNMIT, 2012).

Political parties play a critical role in democratic governance by recruiting leaders, shaping public policies, and providing platforms for political competition.

However, when political parties are plagued by internal conflicts, their ability to perform these roles effectively is undermined.

## VI. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SYSTEMS THEORY

This study adopts David Easton's systems theory as its analytical framework. Systems theory views the political system as a set of interactions through which societal demands are converted into authoritative decisions (Easton, 1957; Easton, 1965).

According to Easton, political systems operate through a process involving inputs, outputs, and feedback. Inputs consist of demands and support from the environment, while outputs are the decisions and policies produced by the political system.

When political institutions fail to convert societal demands into appropriate outputs, tensions and conflicts emerge within the system.

Political parties can be viewed as subsystems within the larger political system. When internal party demands for fairness, inclusiveness, and representation are not adequately addressed, internal conflicts emerge.

## VII. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. The research design used is the ex-post facto design, which

allows the researcher to examine events that have already occurred.

Data were collected from secondary sources including books, academic journals, newspaper reports, and electoral records. Participant observation also provided insights into political developments within Nigerian political parties.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

## VIII. INTERNAL PARTY CONFLICT AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

Internal party conflicts have significantly affected the electoral fortunes of political parties in Nigeria.

The internal crisis within the PDP in 2013 led to the defection of several prominent politicians to the APC. This political realignment contributed to the APC's victory in the 2015 presidential election, where Muhammadu Buhari defeated the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan (IFES, 2015).

Similarly, internal conflicts within the APC affected its electoral performance in several states. In Zamfara State, internal disputes prevented the party from conducting valid primaries, leading to the nullification of APC victories by the Supreme Court (Iroanusi, 2019).

## IX. INTERNAL PARTY CONFLICT AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Internal party conflicts also have broader implications for democratic governance.

First, internal conflicts distract political leaders from governance responsibilities. Instead of focusing on policy implementation and development, political actors become preoccupied with internal struggles for power. Second, internal conflicts lead to the misuse of state resources. Political actors often deploy state resources to strengthen their political factions or suppress opponents. Third, internal party conflicts weaken political institutions and undermine public trust in democratic governance.

## X. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between internal party conflict and democratic governance in Nigeria between 2015 and 2022. The findings indicate that internal party conflicts in Nigeria are driven primarily by the absence of internal democracy, political opportunism, and leadership struggles.

These conflicts have negative consequences for democratic governance, including political instability, misuse of state resources, and weakened political institutions. Strengthening internal party democracy and institutional discipline within political parties is therefore essential for consolidating democracy in Nigeria.

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