

POLITICAL PARTIES AS BUSINESS VENTURES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the Nigerian state's inability to factor its political system and processes to meet international best practices of fulfilling the democratic tenets and dividends, this paper examines the critical roles played in a democracy by political parties, their structure, organization and challenges. This paper used data source through the review of relevant literature and concludes that unlike the practices in the developed societies where the political parties essentially play the role of mobilizing voters for national development, socializing citizens on national issues, organizing government through elite formation and recruitment as well as uniting and stabilizing the political processes, the Nigerian party system is one in which parties are organized more as business ventures that seek to maximize benefits for a few political actors rather than for the public good. It was therefore suggested that the electoral process needs serious overhauling and reformation to allow for credible representations. It was equally suggested that the largesse that comes with political offices, which attracts and aggravates these negative politicking, be slashed to encourage persons with genuine intention for service to humanity to assume leadership positions.

Keywords: Democracy, Representative Government, Political Parties, Business Ventures

Introduction

According to Ezeani (2010:57) democracy is by far the most popular form of government in the world today, thus every regime no matter its form, content and operations seem to lay claim to it (Ezeani, 2010:57). It may seem that democracy has come to mean different things and have received different interpretations, for example Isitoah (1996:72) while acknowledging that the contemporary usage of the concept has undergone different interpretations over time noted the three basic variants or models put forward by Uzoka (2000) cited in Eregha and Ewhro (2004) namely: Direct or Participatory Democracy, Indirect, Liberal or Representative Democracy, and the Marxist Tradition or Peoples' Democracy.

Democracy, according to Schumpeter is "a political method, that is to say, a certain type of institutional arrangement for arriving at political, legislative and administrative decisions" (Atim 2019:12). It is a method by which the individual acquires the power to participate in decision making by means of a competitive struggle for the peoples' votes. Thus the main requirement for democracy is that the people have the opportunity of accepting or rejecting those who rule over them. Schattschneider on his part defines democracy as "a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision making process" (Buku 2015:24). Among the principles which the democratic system enunciates include popular sovereignty, political equality, popular consultation and majority rule. It also has certain characteristics such as: the prevalence of the will of the majority, the existence of party system and non-party groups such as pressure groups, free elections, etc. Thus according to Dahl (1976), a reasonable responsive democracy can exist only if at least eight institutional guarantees are present as follows:

1. Freedom to form and join organizations (especially political parties)
2. Freedom of expression
3. Right to vote
4. Eligibility for public office
5. Right of political leaders to compete for support and votes
6. Alternative sources of information
7. Free, fair and credible elections, and
8. Institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preferences.

From the forgoing, it is instructive to note that modern day concept of democracy as (Indirect, Liberal or Representative) governments are anchored on the existence and operations of the party system without which it cannot operate successfully. Schattschneider (1942:1) cited in Ezeani (2010:157) avers that “the rise of political parties is indubitably one of the principle distinguishing marks of modern government. Political parties it was stated created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties”.

It is therefore clear from the analysis so far that the main focus of this paper is on the representative democratic model, this is so because the famous definition credited to Abraham Lincoln (quoted in Chaturvedi, 2006:82) as “government of the people, by the people, for the people” no longer appropriately describes the operation of modern governmental systems. While the democratic practices of the Greek City-states presented opportunities for such direct participation, the modern political systems only provide opportunities for representations hence Appadorai, in *The Substance of Politics* aptly captures this reality when he opines that democracy is a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through the representatives that are elected periodically (Isitoah, 2006:78).

In our view therefore, Representative Democracy refers to a system of governance where people select candidates usually during elections to represent their interest in the legislature for a given period of time. This was informed by the need to transfer power and confer authority on these representatives to manage the state institutions, maintain law and order, as well as creating the enabling environment for the needs of the people to be met.

According to Dahl, cited in Okpaga (2002), the essential conditions necessary for democracy are:

1. Control over governmental decisions about policy and constitutionally vested in elected officials.
2. Elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon.
3. Practically all adults have the right to run for elective office in government.
4. Citizens have a right to express themselves without anger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined.
5. Citizens have a right to seek out alternatives sources of information moreover alternative sources of information exist and are protected by law.
6. Practically, all adult have the right to vote in the election of officials, and
7. Citizens have also the right to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest group as this provides the platform for the selection processes to be actualized.

Theoretical Framework:

In this study, we adopted the Economic Approach to the study of politics. This approach tends to explain political actions and activities as arising from economic motives. In other words, it assumes that there is a relationship between economic and political life. According to the political economist, Lindblom (1977:8) cited in Ezeani (2010:71) “in all economic systems of the world, much of politics is economic and most of economies is also politics.”

While the conventional analyst will look at the relationship between politics and economics from the point of government consideration of economic issues in arriving at its political decisions and policy directions and enterprises looking up to government for services, maintenance, protection and the enabling laws and environment to operate, there are other perspectives. For instance, some may choose to adopt the cost-benefit approach in which case public policy decisions measure benefits and cost of each policy alternatives to arrive at a suitable option, or through the application of exchange theory which conceives of politics as a process similar to economics, in that both involves interacting individuals and groups who exchange goods and services in pursuit of their own interest.

Explaining this, Isaak (1985:250) Ezeani (2010:71), argue that economic goods and services such as cars, money, credits etc. are exchanged in economic systems, while political goods and services such as voters support, power and security are exchanged in political systems.

It is in this wise that we propose that the whole processes of the formation and operations of political parties are (especially in Nigeria) geared towards economic benefits derivable on assumption of political offices, hence the notion of political parties as business ventures. We will also borrow from the Marxian Political Economy approach that postulates that every aspect of human behaviour is conditioned by material base; particularly on the question that government (political parties) and the state are class instruments employed to promote and protect the interest of those in power.

Literature Review:

Political Parties:

A clear and precise conceptualization of the term party would be useful to our investigation, understanding and explanation of the phenomena and to that extent establish its relationship whether as a business venture or otherwise; accordingly, such an exercise should attempt to fulfill four fundamental conditions as follows:

It should in the first place not be ambiguous but sufficiently clear to serve as a guide to the selection of data;

Secondly it should be distinct i.e. clearly able to distinguish itself from other concepts such as a line of distinction between political parties and other political organizations; Furthermore, the concept should be broad and general as to stimulate and aid the development of theory that would not be bound by time and space; and finally such a meaning put forward is agreed with by scholars to explain political phenomena or for research in the area of operation of the subject matter (Buku 1999:15).

In the literature of political parties, there are various notions of political parties as there are scholars considering that each researcher has attempted to define the concept based on what he has aimed at looking for. The result is that the search for the true meaning of political parties has become difficult and complicated and by extension, no single concept of the party satisfies the quartet of criteria for conceptual analysis highlighted above.

Furthermore, this search according to Buku (1999) “has been further complicated by the fact that the term party is a generic term which transcends many splices of sub-categories”. To define one party as sharply and rigorously as possible he contended may result in the exclusion of other political parties due to the fact that the nature, organization and activities of parties differ from country to country and in some cases such as in the US within the same country.

A political party has been defined as an organized group of individuals who hold similar political opinion and work together to get control of government so as to realize certain aims, which they hold in common, especially the implementation of political programmes for the benefit of the people. The word similar as used here clearly indicates that the political society is made up of diverse people and multiple interest and inclinations, thus the main advantage of the party system is the opportunities it provides for people with similar conceptions, ideas and opinion to work collectively to actualize such positions that they hold in common.

Whenever a group is able to attain an aggregate of opinion or position, it follows then that the diversity and complexity of reaching collective agreements are reduced. This is probably why Edmund Burke (quoted in Ball, 1983:75) defines political parties as “*A body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principles in which they are all united*”

This definition has been criticized by Ezeani (2010:156) on the grounds that in the first place, it failed to distinguish political parties from other groups such as legislative cliques also made up of “men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest”, and more fundamentally that it wrongly assumes that all political parties are founded on particular principles or ideology. He was emphatic that this is not the case particularly in developing climes such as in Nigeria where none of the existing parties can be said to be founded on any particular ideology

Buku (1999) who wrote during the second republic of Nigeria’s political development attested to the above when he asserts that the five political parties in Nigeria in that era were conceptually identical. Not only were they not different from one another, but that it was indefensible to regard any one of them namely NPN, UPN, NPP, PRP and GNPP as prototype of political party organization. In the present dispensation, this situation has not changed and this is quite instructive considering that we are looking at political parties as business ventures.

In the words of Adigwe (1979) “when a number of people sharing a common political philosophy and advocating a distinct style of government organized themselves into a group or union for the purpose of promoting that philosophy and helping to determine how a state is to be governed, they are said to have formed a political party”.

Okwudiba Nnoli (1986) also defined a political a party as “a group of people who share a common conception on how and why state power should be organized and used”. Explaining this definition, he contended that all parties are organizations that differ from unorganized or amorphous groups of citizens. In addition, party activities relate directly to the interest of the society at large and finally, they differ from all political groups by the fact that they transcend agitations geared towards influencing governmental policies, but seek the responsibility to implement such policies.

It is this willingness to take responsibility for implementing policies for Nnoli that sets the political party apart from such organizations as trade unions, professional organizations, socio-cultural groups and other forms of pressure groupings found scattered throughout the society. Cord (1974:286) seem to key into this perspective when they defined a political party as “a group that is involved wholly in politics and its primary purpose is to be represented formally in the policy-making institutions of government”.

Again the view of Appadorai (1975:537) may not be too fundamentally different as he defined it as (... a more or less organized group of citizens who act together as a political unit, have distinctive aims and opinion on the leading political question of controversy in the state, and who, by acting together as a political unit, seek to obtain control of the government”.

Furthermore, a number of commentators and scholars hold the party as an organization; conceptualized as an organization, the party is characterized by formal and explicit patterns of relationships. The party formation and structure are based upon the principles of hierarchy. In other words, formal relationships amongst the members of the party as well as among the various levels of the party organization conform to the principles embodied in the idea of super ordination and subordination. As Buku (1999: 24) notes, within the party there is emphasis on office as opposed to personal role; in fact, office becomes the basic unit of the political party.

Thus, for instance, MacDonald maintains that to regard the party as an organization is in fact to stress such qualities of structure and process as formality, explicitness, definition, efficiency and determinateness of authority (Buku 1999: 25). Also Ostrogorski (1958) regards the party as ideally a body which is deliberately organized to mobilize and express mass opinion in relation to public issues and question. He then argued that even though the party has other attributes or qualities, its organizational attributes tend to predominate, emphasizing that order and hierarchy are the basic or essential features of the political party.

From the same perspective, J.S. Coleman (1966) regards the party as a formally organized association or structure with explicit and a clear objective of acquiring and maintaining control of the government. The party may be committed to the realization of these objectives singly or in conjunction with other like organization. The party therefore engages in an electoral competition with other similar organizations over the personnel and policies of the government of the state.

In the literature of political parties we carried out above, the following elements seem to have emerged:

1. There is the agreement that the party is an aggregation of persons to whom an identifiable label is generally applied. Members of the party first identify themselves and are secondly identified by others with the party label or emblem.
2. There exists also a general agreement that within the party there exist some measure of organization in which persons act deliberately and collectively in order to achieve the stated goals of the party.
3. A general agreement that the right of persons to organize themselves and work for the achievement of the objectives or goals of the party is guaranteed and legitimized, i.e. the party exists and operates openly and it's right to do so is never in doubt.
4. Finally, an agreement that the political party is an instrument of representative government. Thus the party is characterized by the functions of making nominations,

appealing for votes for their candidates and programmes while engaging in electoral contest.

Buku (1999: 27) opines that these functions constitute an essential element of the party strategy for gaining and controlling the personnel and policies of government. Consequently, it can be inferred that any formation that conforms to these theoretical elements, especially in contemporary times may be appropriately conceptualized as a political party.

With respect to functions, the primary function of the political party is to identify, define and clarify issues for the electorates, in Sottan's metaphor, parties cut roads through the jungles of conflicting individual opinions with each road offering either a separate destination or separate ways of reaching agreed goals."

It has also been argued that well-articulated party programmes help to make the will of the electorates discernible. In the words of S.E. Finer, (cited in Isitoah 2010:96) "without parties an electorate will either be impotent or destructive by embarking on impossible policies that would only wreck the political machine. "Thus it has been said that the primary function or task of the political party is to organize the conflicting will of the public.

In the opinion of Lord Bryce, political parties bring order out of the chaos of a multitude of voters. Parties he contended are constantly brokers of ideas, constantly clarifying, systematizing and expanding their party doctrines or ideology and by this process helping to enlighten the citizens on how best to manage the collective interest. Thereby simplifying the choices open to the private citizen and his subsequent participation in the political process.

Beyond the point explained so far, political parties are representatives of social interest groups, bridging the distance between the individual and the greater community. They also maximize the voter's education in the competitive scheme of things just as they sharpening his free choice. They enable the voters "... chose at least the lesser of two or more evils".

Olawole (1979) contended that parties can act as the brokers of ideas from the mass of opinions of the public and they choose those they judge most likely to meet general acceptance, and which are practical and capable of being realized. Analysts have also expressed the views that parties transform the private citizens and integrate him into the larger societal group. Every party has to present to the individual voter and his powerful special interest group a picture of a community as a whole or an entity. Constantly reminding him of societal collective interest, adjust his aspiration and particular interest to conform with those of the larger society and if necessary ask him to sacrifice his particular interest in for the general good of the community.

Furthermore, political parties are useful as bridge builders and intermediaries between the ordinary citizen and his social group on one hand and the government on the other. They also assist the electorates to narrow down the selection of leaders by presenting to them manageable alternatives options; so as to make the right choice as far as their intellectual capacities can carry.

Machinery for the selection of personnel's aside, parties also take the responsibility to assume the leadership of the society after winning elections to effectively manage the collective interest which they articulate during electioneering campaigns. In all if the political party is

not in existent, the electorate will vote in many directions, and there would be no guarantee for stable rule.

Political Party as Business Ventures

Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines a venture as “an undertaking involving chance, risk, or danger especially: a speculative business enterprise.” The business venture therefore refers to a new business that is formed with a plan and expectation that financial gain will follow (upcounsel.com). Explaining further, a business venture arises out of the need to provide a service or market a product lacking in the market, or creating a brand to compete with existing products or services. It often starts with the funding of an individual or group of persons with the expectation that it will yield profit overtime. Additional investors may become involved to provide support and resources for expansion and development all of which is propelled by the intention of sharing a substantial profit among all that invested.

In the literature of political parties presented above, none by its organization, structure, ideology or functions bears any resemblance to the concept of business venture; again nothing can be sourced from available documents linking these two concepts in any direct form. At best, we can establish that there is a relationship between government and business institutions in any country in the sense that they are interrelated and interdependent.

While businessmen and entrepreneurs are said to be the driving forces of an economy and influences government through personal conducts and lobbying, trade union activities, political action committees and large investments among others, government holds and direct the shaping of such business activates through laws and regulations, its regulative agencies, the SEC and Central Banks as well as trade policies among others.

The main goal of business is to make a profit and that of governments is to ensure economic stability and growth, thus despite their differences, they are co-dependent and that is the reason each tries to influence and persuade the in ways such as we highlighted above. How then can we give meaning to “Political parties as business ventures?” Perhaps, if we focus on the downside of political parties and the role of politicians especially in developing societies such as Nigeria, we may be able to establish this link.

The attitude which is found not only among journalists and writers, but majorly among the general public which lends credence to the subject of this work is that politicians are a bunch of untrustworthy egocentric and selfish parasites who use all the tricks in the book to wrest power and through this process acquire unlimited access to the collective wealth which they appropriate for private gains; thus it has been said that “politics is the shortest, fastest and surest means to wealth.”

Granted that the politician cannot always do what he will like to do, and the methods which he must adopt are not always ideal, there is still a world of difference in the way politics is conducted in more advance societies compared with countries in Africa particularly in Nigeria. The politicians in Europe and the Americas despite his limitations never lose sight of the fact that he is in government to do things, and not merely to male speeches about them.

Here in Nigeria, we find a contrast; the contract of representation often times is seriously negated simply because his involvement in government in the first place may not have come through the people’s mandate but though electoral fraud. The politicians here rather than being the representative of the people with the mandate to find solution to their varied problems and needs, is a self- imposed messiah whose ideas and preferences are sacrosanct.

The Nigerian politician is a monarch, a paramount ruler with absolute powers to demand respect and loyalty from the marginalized, impoverished and subjugated citizens he claims to represent. His first impulse is to attempt to elongate his tenure in office and to constantly put himself and interest ahead of the polity not to mention his constituency (Isitoah 2009:14).

Writing under the caption 'Dead and Dying Political Parties of Nigeria DDPN' in the March 27, 2006 edition of Tell Magazine, Nosa Igiebor has this to say about the Nigerian politicians

"...they are a noisy, clueless and unreliable bunch. Like the magic of the Chameleon that performs its colour pyrotechnics with amazing ease, they Possess the gift to change their mood and positions without the slightest Tinge of irony. For them, the end justifies their infidelity to principles, Abysmal lack of any convictions and contempt for loyalty to the people They pretend to serve."

From the foregoing, party politics in our society have become disadvantageous on the following grounds:

1. Parties have become corrupt and decadent especially where members under the guise of pursuing public good are using public offices to gain personal and sectional benefits. Favoritism and nepotism rules while merits and competence is relegated to the background.
2. Parties have become instruments for the oppression of those whom they claim to represent especially where intrigues and foul means are employed to acquire and retain political power against the wishes of the people.
3. Rigid adherences to party ideals and so called party discipline have lowered the moral and intellectual standard of our leaders and by extension the society at large. Partisanship has created sets of 'yes men' who now excuses their intellectual and moral decadence on the requirement of party loyalty and leaders, little wonder the legislature have largely failed to checkmate the executive, vice versa.
4. Most fundamentally, our nation is being deprived of the services of intelligent, competent and credible personnel due to politics of exclusion, spoils system and election based on party allegiance, (in the Nigerian parlance "you only chop with us when you have worked with us").
5. Parties are also accused of exaggerating differences and give false impression of issues thereby producing always a partisan outlook instead of a national outlook on issues of policy and management of the state, this has become worrisome and if not checked is capable of destroying the very foundation of the country.
6. Consequent upon the foregoing, our parties lacking in distinction, ideologically barren and largely dysfunctional in the functions they are expected to carry out are now seen as necessary evil because of the tendency to degenerate. Members at best are factions struggling for the gains of a few under the guise of national interest.

Indeed the corrupting and decadent nature of the Nigerian political parties, their structure and operations leave much to be desired, the antics of the party in power and its shameful enthronement of favoritism and sectional interest as against merit, competence and equity, lack internal party democracy especially in the selection of flag bearers and most disturbing the gangster style of politics where rather accept the will of the people freely expressed through the ballot, elections are rigged wholesale with persons of questionable credentials foist on the masses tells much about our system.

The penchant to remain in power at all cost irrespective of the will of the people while expecting everyone to remain mute and accept the rot in the system is disturbing to say the least. It is a common practice in Nigeria to regard anyone who opposes or question those in authority even for very good reasons as an enemy, misguided and being used by the “opposition” to undermine the “integrity” of those in power.

Truly our parties as factions competing for gains affirms that here politics is the fastest and surest means to wealth, fame and fortune, this is why the quest for power has been characterized as a do or die affair, politics Nigerian style is a costly and uncertain investment, it is a business to be nurtured and protected in view of the expected benefits. This will explain why carpet crossing is a common feature in the politics of our nation. The average Nigerian politician will readily decamp from one party to another once he is convinced or sensed that the party he belongs to will no longer provide opportunities for the unmitigated access to the exploitation and amassing of the national wealth or “cake” as it is often called, in fact, he retains the position he was elected to in the old party in his new choice.

In a nutshell, ours is one in which some persons have high jacked Nigeria as their private estate (business venture) for private gains, it explains the recycling of dead woods in government for too long, the institutionalization of dynasties where people are appointed into offices based on family names and offices are handed over from father to son, from one cousin to another. In its entirety, it explains the rots that have characterized leadership in the country and the seemingly inaction of the various organs of government to do the needful, and this is the situation we are compelled to contend with.

Can we now liken our political parties to business ventures?

The answer to the above will be an emphatic “No” and “Yes”. No because nothing in the literature of political parties give any such suggestion whether in the consideration of its definitions, tenets, ideologies, goals, functions and operations. Again “Yes” arising from our analysis of the downside and realities of party politics in Nigeria. Reacting in an article to the various fees for nomination forms to be paid by aspirants as listed by political parties in the last general election, Isitoah and Ogidiagba (2019) observed that party politics in Nigeria was degenerating into a risky business investment where those who are successful will definitely seek to recover whatever they have expended with profit in seeking political office while those who will lose out will become bankrupt and in serious debt.

This is the reality today. The cost of electioneering campaign in its entirety when seeking political office is such that will not attract any serious minded citizen whose intent is to serve public good but for those who sees politics as an investment. This is why “Godfatherism” characterizes our political space, not many aspirants can muster the resources required for overt and covert electoral costs, so basically they fall back to sponsor who will eventually highjack such coveted offices and hold those elected in captive for the duration of their tenure.

Political parties as business venture simple allude to the present realities in our society and attempt to highlight our dysfunctional party system. The analysis above clearly shows that in other climes, the understanding of political parties and the important roles they play in making democracy to work falls short in our society. The reasons discussed and other that may exist clearly lend credence to the notion that what we have as political parties are nothing more than a platform for recovery of an investment (monies spent to acquire political

office) by politicians, it goes without saying that this situation must be remedied to forestall the drift being experienced in the country today.

Recommendations:

Democracy implies the recognition of the duties of government and the rights of the people, the system ensures a measure of personal freedom and equal consideration for all persons irrespective of class, and this is why it is said to be superior to other forms of government; the fact that individual rights and interests are secured from being disregarded.

A more fundamental plus for democracy is that the government depend less on the psychology of power and the use of coercion than in any other form of government. The democratic method is to reach decisions by discussion, arguments, subtle reasoning and persuasions and by so reaching compromises.

The democratic concept as an ideal proposition seeks to get the best out of every government, it represents a goal in view which all governments must strive to meet if the purposes for which it was established is to be realized. It is therefore imperative that the party system which is the driving force for the management of government towards the attainment of set goals must grow beyond the dysfunctional realities and be repositioned to succeed. To this end we make the following recommendations:

1. To inject sanity into the political process, the national assembly (unfortunately the direct beneficiary of the existing flawed system) should legislate on the issue of carpet-crossing of persons elected under the platform of a party into another and still holding on to the position they were elected into in the first instance. The ease with which politicians osculate from one party to another is indicative of their lack of ideological distinctions, the pursuit of selfish and personal agenda and a negation of principled political character.
2. The attraction to politics obviously is not unconnected with the enormous benefits and opportunities open to politicians, their immediate families and circle of friends. In a situation where civil servants earn peanuts (an un-living minimum wage of thirty thousand Naira) while members of the legislature pocket a minimum of twenty-five million monthly in a country suffering serious economic, security, political and social challenges is unfair, unreasonable and invitation to unrest in no distant time. Nigeria is perhaps the backward and undeveloped country with the highest benefits paid to public office holders, this situation must be addressed.
3. Some have suggested that the legislature should be part-time, politician they argued have lost touch with present realities and therefore should work for their wages and engage in other meaningful ventures so that they will be exposed to the realities of the 'street' rather than sit in the chambers with over starched chorusing "Approved, Approved." We agree whole heartedly that politicians have lost touch with realities, moral and values; there is therefore the need to bring them back to society through meaningful and practical engagements.
4. Furthermore, the people must be oriented to exercise their power of recall to checkmate politicians found wanting in their contract of representation. The English philosopher and physician John Locke, regarded as one of the most influential of Enlightenment thinkers wrote that the people reserves the right to resist and even violently overthrow a government which have failed to execute the social contract. Nigerians usually do not take responsibility to lose the chains with which they have be shackled and bound due

to ignorance, illiteracy, ethnicity, religious and other primordial sentiments, for us to progress this must change.

5. Finally, rather than pay lip service on the fight against corruption while society in its entire framework is sinking deeper into the highest level of corrupt practices and decadence, the graft agencies (ICPC, EFCC and other security agencies) should conclusively persecute electoral offenders and persons who have corruptly enriched themselves from the commonwealth. As it is today, there is no deterrence but encouragement to electoral offenders and looters of the public treasury.

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