

Democracy in Jeopardy: An Analysis of the Prospects of Opposition Political Parties in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Article History

Received on 29 March 2023

1st Revised on 24 April 2023

2nd Revised on 5 June 2023

Accepted on 9 June 2023

Abstract

Purpose: Opposition political parties are generally believed to be weak in Africa and particularly in Nigeria. Despite their centrality to the democratic consolidation, opposition parties are not performing the critical role as watchdogs to the ruling party partly because of their sizes or fragmentations. This study examined the role of the ruling political party in Nigeria and, by extension, the Nigerian government in making opposition parties be perpetually weak to ensure its hold on power.

Research methodology: The study employed qualitative data in carrying out the research.

Results: From the contextual analysis of the literature reviewed, the study discovered that weak political institutions and a lack of political will are largely at the heart of the problem in Nigeria.

Recommendations: It posited that transparency and political will on the part of the ruling party and the government will create a level playing field for all political parties to thrive.

Keywords: *democratic consolidation, opposition political parties, Nigeria's fourth republic, ruling party, political institutions*

How to cite: Olajubu, A. (2022). Democracy in Jeopardy: An Analysis of the Prospects of Opposition Political Parties in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. *Dynamics of Politics and Democracy*, 1(2), 125-134.

1. Introduction

Contemporary debate in Nigeria today is not just about whether democracy will survive or not but about the quality of its electoral process as it is the major determinant of democratic consolidation. The roles and functions of opposition parties in consolidating democracy are of utmost importance (Southall, 2000). A proper democratic electoral process cannot be without a viable competitive or multi-party contest that will help to abolish authoritarian democracy and one-party dominance so as to avoid molestation of the electoral system (Khan, 2021; Oyewole & Omotola, 2022). Opposition political party is central to the balance of power and it adds dynamic attributes to the operations of democratic systems for such governments to be legitimised (Adebisi, Bakare, & Saka, 2019). Modern understandings of what democracy is typically encapsulated in Dahl's dictate that democracy requires not only popular participation but also competitive contestation. It is expected to be a multi-party contestation where the electorate can choose among alternatives (Weghorst & Lindberg, 2011).

As vital as political parties are to democracy, so are opposition parties to democratic consolidation. This is because they play a crucial role in organising partisan movements devoted to opposing and competing with the party in government during elections which gives legitimacy to such elections. Opposition parties have also been seen as promoters of good governance, act as watchdogs and serve as alternative governments (Auwal, 2021). Democracy is expected to be built around normative values of constitutional governance, citizens' participation, competition and accountability which could be referred to as the lung through which democracy breathes. When the election is competitive, it adds quality and quantity of choices and opens up the political space for the electorates which enriches the quality and content of participation (Adenuga, 2022; Adenuga, Adenuga & Oderinde,

2021; Huntington, 1991; Mauk, 2022). In addition, opposition parties help to stabilise governments in a truly democratic society. It is worth noting that the level to which an opposition party can perform the function of a countervailing force depends largely on the cohesiveness of the opposition party in terms of leadership and structure. Lack/inadequacy of cohesiveness has always been the reason why opposition political parties have been referred to as weak (Bogard, 2007; Young, 2004). Aside from the structure and leadership of opposition parties, the ruling party also plays a major role in paralysing and weakening opposition parties from functioning effectively. Most ruling parties give zero tolerance to opposition parties and lack the political will to accommodate them. The ruling party is scared of competition in the electoral market and this has provided the basis for the history of violence in Nigerian elections because the incumbent wants to remain in power while it has failed to deliver on electioneering promises and in leadership (Hamalai, Egwu, & Omotola, 2017; S. Omotola, 2010; Oyewole & Omotola, 2022). Because the opposition equally wants to wrestle power from the ruling party and the latter wants to maintain its dominance, then the whole process turns violent.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptualising Election

Concepts are not easily conceptualised in the social sciences and the election is no exception. The election has been understood to be a process through which citizens choose representatives into positions of authority to govern their affairs for a specified period of time. The electoral process is expected to be free, fair and credible which will give equal opportunities to all political parties to have a chance of winning the contest (Abutudu, 2014; Agbaje & Adejumobi, 2006; Omotola, 2014).

A competitive election that is conducted in a free, fair and credible manner involves some complex interactions by multiple actors, including opposition political parties. Therefore, a free, fair, credible and competitive election is seen as the minimal precondition in order for a country to be democratised and when the process fails this simple test of fairness and credibility, such an election cannot be described to be democratic. Norris, Frank and Coma (2014) have noted that when the integrity of elections has been tarnished by the incumbent because of the absence of procedural fairness and equality of opportunity for all political parties, then such a system is autocratic.

Elections in Nigeria have been marred by violence as ruling political parties seek to maintain power by discrediting any potential for the opposition. This violence has physically, structurally, and psychologically kept opposition parties weak indefinitely (Obafemi, Egwu, Ibeanu, & Ibrahim, 2014). A marred election is a defining factor in failed democratization processes, therefore there is the need to conduct it in a process that will give equal opportunity to all political parties. Again, it is important to note that an election is not just an election day activity process but also encompasses activities before, during and after the election period. These activities include legal and constitutional frameworks for elections such as registration of political parties, party campaigns, financing and security among others. Therefore the quality of any election depends largely on the credibility and acceptability of such elections which can only be given by the level of tolerance of opposition parties (Auwal, 2021; Branton, English, Pettey, & Barnes, 2018). Furthermore, the election is more than just choosing representatives for public office but also empowering ordinary citizens. It also allows electorates to influence the policies of the government when it is conducted in a free, fair and credible environment. Nonetheless, the election is seen as a fundamental pillar of any democratic system, as it is the most important and visible mechanism by which citizens can peacefully pick or remove a leader who is performing or not performing. In the same vein, the election is a crucial instrument through which leaders are compelled and encouraged to be accountable and pay attention to their citizens (Anglin, 1998; Mesfin, 2008). Above all, an election generally is meant to choose a representative that will help in formulating policies and at the same time, it gives citizens the sense of inclusiveness and belonging in a multi-party political contest that is free, fair and its process credible and thereby legitimising the leadership of such government.

2.2 The concept of opposition political party

The concept of opposition political parties refers to a relationship with another body that is in some type of disagreement (Norton, 2008). Kiiza (2005) views an opposition political party from the perspective of the functions it performs which can be summarised as follows: interest aggregation, promoting responsible and reasoned debates, maintaining touch with voters and citizens, demonstrating the relevance of politics to ordinary people and providing a viable alternative form of government. Without credible opposition political parties, a fully democratic society would be impossible. Indeed, there is no option without political opposition, and when there is no choice, the masses cannot exercise their right to rule (Bybee & Dahl, 1989; Lindberg & Lindberg, 2006; Omotola, 2014). In the same vein, Ottaway (1997) also underscores the importance of opposition when he posits that no political system can be said to be democratic in the absence of a very strong alternative centre of power and such an alternative centre of power is a vibrant opposition party. Webb (2009) and Omotola (2014) are of the view that democracy can never be regarded as meaningful when it fails to provide the people the opportunity needed to exercise the degree of choice over public affairs.

It is salient to note that no political party is formed to be in perpetual opposition. Therefore, it is important to note that a lot of controversies exist about the concept. Southall (2000) however identified six uses of the term opposition. First, the opposition may mean total resistance to the form and basis of the state. Second, it may denote resistance to the power of the state when the latter is viewed as an oppressive institution. Third, it may refer to resistance to the group, faction or dynasty in command of the state, and to a denial of its legitimacy. Fourth, it may be used to denote a loyal opposition, which opposes the commanding group without either contesting its legitimacy or threatening or rejecting the basis of the state or the constitution. Fifth, the opposition may refer to a system of checks and balances whereby the constitution guards against and corrects its own excesses; and finally, the term may describe the methods whereby the citizens or group modifies a government's actions or prevents its tyrannies, without condemning the latter as inherently oppressive.

Furthermore, opposition political parties are founded with the purpose of squeezing power from the ruling party while also chasing legislative and executive positions (Dolo, 2006; Teshome-Bahiru, 2009). Opposition political parties can also be thought of as a minority administration that does not have executive power but acts as a watchdog on the government. Going by the above definitions, it becomes clearer that, the concept of opposition political party varies in its meanings, as the word opposition is often used daily to account for a variety of developments and meanings. Therefore, what constitutes opposition is highly contestable depending on the individual. This is why some analysts think that the concept of opposition should be limited to institutionalized opposition within the context of established liberal democracy. Thus, the word opposition political party has been used to refer to those outside the government who did not form the majority or win the majority in government. Given this wide array of usage, Weinblum and Brack (2011) submit that the role and focus of the opposition political party range from criticizing of government to offering new options, shedding light on specific questions and politicizing issues.

It is therefore not a deniable fact that the opposition political party plays a significant role in any democratic setting (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Wiebrecht, 2021). Opposition political party helps to consolidate and deepen democracy but when there is no opposition, the masses or electorates are always denied the opportunity to make choices during elections. In the same vein, a very strong opposition political party is needed to create effective checks and accountability on a backsliding or authoritarian regime (LeBas, 2003; Teshome-Bahiru, 2009).

2.3 Opposition political parties since 1999

This section shows parties that have been in opposition since the commencement of the fourth republic in 1999. These are the parties that did not win presidential elections but won some state

governorship elections or/ and got seats in the National Assembly (Senate and House of Representatives). Some of these parties also won some seats in the States' Houses of Assembly.

Table 1. Opposition parties since 1999

Party	Year	Governor	National Ass
APP/ANPP	1999	NINE	74/29
AD/AC/ACN	1999	6	68/20
APP/ANPP	2003	7	96/27
AD/AC/ACN	2003	1	34/6
APGA	2003	1	-
PRP	2003	-	1
APP/ANPP	2007	5	63/14
AD/AC/ACN	2007	4	30/6
LP	2007	1	1
AP	2007	-	1
PPA	2007	-	1
APP/ANPP	2011	1	25/7
AD/AC/ACN	2011	6	69/18
CPC	2011	1	38/7
APGA	2011	2	7
LP	2011	1	8/4
OTHERS	2011		6/2

CHANGE OF PATTERN OF OPPOSITION

PDP	2015	13	140/40
APGA	2015	1	5
LP/AP			3
PDP	2019	15	127/44
APGA	2019	1	9
YPP	2019		1
APM	2019		1
ADP	2019		1
LP	2019		1
SDP	2019		1
AA	2019		2
PRP	2019		2
ADC	2019		3
A	2019		1

The above are the major opposition political parties right from the start of the fourth republic. These parties included the Alliance for Democracy (AD) which later metamorphosed into the Action Congress (AC) and later to the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN). This party dominated the six southwestern states by winning the governorship seats of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo States. It also swept the elections into the Houses of Assembly in the six states. The party was the main opposition party in 1999 as its presidential candidate was the only alternative to the candidate presented by the Peoples' Democratic Party which became the ruling party. It also won a reasonable number of seats in the National Assembly such as twenty (20) in the Senate and sixty-eight (68) in the House of Representatives (HOR). The All People's Party (APP) also later became the All Nigerian People's Party. This party dominated the northern part of the country as an opposition political party and won nine (9) state governorship elections to its credit and also had twenty-nine (29) members in the Senate and seventy-four (74) in the House of Representatives.

The 2003 election witnessed so many irregularities such as rigging, ballot snatching, intimidation, violence among others which hindered the progress of the opposition parties (Erameh, Oni, &

Ojajorotu, 2021; Nwanegbo & Alumona, 2011; Omotola, 2006; Omotola, 2010; Omotola, 2014; Tenuche, 2011). Even with the irregularities recorded, the opposition still managed to record significant victories. The ANPP/APP won seven (7) state governorship elections in the North and produced ninety-six (96) of the membership of the House of Representatives (HOR) and twenty-seven (27) senators. The AD/AC/ACN won the Lagos governorship election and had thirty-four (34) seats in the House of Representatives (HOR) and six (6) senators. Two additional opposition parties also sprang up to prominence. The All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) won the governorship election in Anambra and People's Redemption Party (PRP) had a seat in the national assembly.

The 2007 general elections have been referred to as the worst post-independence election Nigeria has ever had (Adenuga et al., 2021; Ashindorbe, 2018; Uzodike & Onapajo, 2020). Election observers, both local and international, described the elections as lacking in standard, as the process was not free, fair and lacked credibility throughout the stages of the election. Despite these irregularities, opposition political parties still maintained their strongholds. APP/ANPP still controlled five (5) states in the northern part of the country where it was dominant. It also won sixty-three (63) seats in the House of Representatives and fourteen (14) in the Senate. The AD/AC/ACN had four (4) states to its credit, thirty (30) seats in the HOR and six (6) in the Senate. Despite the range of election malpractices in the 2007 election, another minority party emerged as an opposition which is Labour Party (LP) which also controlled a state and had one member in the national assembly. Again, the Accord Party (AP) and Progressive People's Alliance (PPA) also had one member each in the national assembly. It is worth noting that three (3) of the states won by AD/AC/ACN were won through court proceedings to reclaim the mandates that had been initially claimed by the ruling party of that time.

The 2011 general election was the fourth election in Nigeria since the return of democratic rule. The conduct of the election was an improvement on the previous one because of the high level of transparency and credible electoral process (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs 2011). Accordingly, because of the improvement noticed in the conduct of the election, it further opened up the political space of the country as shown in the level of competitiveness of the election and the increased number of opposition parties that contested the elections. However, there was a decline in the number of states controlled by the APP/ANPP in the North but another opposition party also emerged from the same axis. Therefore, the result of all the opposition political parties was as follows. The APP/ANPP won three (3) governorship elections, twenty-five (25) HOR and Seven (7) senate seats. The AD/AC/ACN was able to re-establish itself by winning six (6) states at the governorship level, sixty-nine (69) seats in the HOR and eighteen (18) in the Senate. Another party that marked its presence in the 2011 general election was the new Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) which won a state at the governorship level, thirty-eight (38) HOR seats and seven in the senate. It is vital to note that this party split from APP/ANPP, meaning that its presence was more felt in the northern part of Nigeria. The Labour Party also maintained the state it won and had eight (8) seats in the HOR and four (4) in the Senate.

In 2015 there was a change of baton as a result of the merger. This time it was a merger of some of the opposition parties and some part of the ruling party that made the alternation of power possible. As Teshome-Bahiru (2009) posits, the opposition often fails to defeat the incumbent party due to fragmentation and failure to form a coalition or merger. He went further to assert that merger or coalition is the only hope that the opposition has to be able to challenge the incumbent as evident in some African countries. This was the case in Nigeria in 2015 when the major opposition political parties formed a coalition or merger to defeat the incumbent party in the 2015 general election and the ruling party now became the opposition. The election was keenly contested between the newly merged party and the ruling party by then and the results turned the ruling party into opposition.

The People's Democratic Party, the new opposition party, had thirteen states to its credit at the governorship level, one hundred and forty (140) HOR seats and forty Senators. Another opposition was APGA which controlled one state at the governorship level and had five (5) members in the HOR. The LP also controlled a state and had two (2) members in the HOR. Flowing the above, the analysis showed that AD/AC/ACN and APP/ANPP are the two major parties that have consistently

been in opposition right from the inception of the Fourth Republic. Other parties that have won a state and still have a national presence include APGA, LP and CPC among others. But the major parties that formed the coalition or merger that brought about alternation of power were the AD/AC/ACN, APP/ANPP, CPC and the defectors from the ruling party that was collectively called the New PDP that formed the All Progressive Congress (APC).

In the 2019 general elections, the APC remained the ruling party and PDP and other parties were the opposition. The 2019 general election was keenly contested among various 72 political parties, which provided for competitiveness and choice for the electorates to choose among the various parties (Sule, Adamu, & Sambo, 2020) with the APC emerging victorious. Thus, the results of the 2019 election were as follows for the various opposition parties. The PDP, the prime opposition won thirteen (13) states to its credit, one hundred and twenty-seven (127) HOR seats and forty-four (44) senate seats. This was followed by APGA which had the control of a state and had nine (9) HOR seats. Young Progressive Party (YPP) had one (1) senate seat to its credit. Social Democratic Party, LP, Accord Party (A), Africa Democratic Party (ADP) and APM all had one member each in the HOR while the AA and PRP had two (2) each in the HOR and ADC had three (3) members in the HOR.

The analysis from the above has shown that AD/AC/ACN and APP/ANPP/CPC had been formidable opposition from the start of the fourth Republic with other minor ones that have made their presence known in the national assembly or at state levels by winning a seat. Accordingly, the opposition party has always made its presence known right from the inception of the Fourth Republic by winning a number of states, however, the 2011 election was a signifier for both the incumbent and the opposition party. It was a signifier for the opposition party that if they can put their difference aside and have a coalition or merger, by forming a big party, they will unseat the incumbent government given their presence in the number of states won in the 2011 election and which is what they eventually did. It was also a signifier for the then ruling party as their dominance began to fall drastically because of rancour, intra-party conflict and the absence of internal party democracy which eventually led to their downfall (Hamalai et al., 2017; Omotola, 2014). This was also made possible because of the electoral reform that was carried out by the Yar'Adua administration. However, since the PDP has assumed the position of the opposition party, it has not been able to perform the function of opposition because of its salience. Worth to note that the conduct of the 2019 election also opened up the political space as evident in other minority parties that emerged such as the ADP, ADC, YPP among others.

2.4 Challenges of opposition political parties in Nigeria

The first tactic the ruling party normally employs is to take advantage of the fragmentation of the opposition to divide and rule them. The ruling party deliberately employs the divide and rule tactic because of the fragmentation of the opposition party. This fragmentation always reinforces the power of the ruling party in dividing opposition parties through intra-party conflicts and thereby weakens them (Howard & Roessler, 2006; Jiménez, 2023; Lust-Okar, 2005; Teshome-Bahiru, 2009). The ruling party targets any viable opposition party it believes can give it a run for its money and possibly affect the outcome of the election result and bring it down in order to stand a better chance of winning the contest.

Secondly, the ruling party equally uses violence to rig elections in its favour and against opposition parties. Let it be clear that all political parties perpetuate violence but as argued by Collier and Vicente (2008) that it is the weakest party that perpetuates violence (meaning the opposition party). However, Oyewole and Omotola (2022) have made it clearer that violence in an election is usually carried out by the ruling party, especially in the areas that are weak or are the strongholds of the opposition with the intent for such elections to be cancelled. In the same vein, it is believed that because the ruling party is in charge of the apparatus of the institution of government (security agents, INEC and media), it is better positioned to employ them to its own advantage. It is worth noting that electoral violence usually comes at different periods such as pre-election, election day and post-election day violence. Pre-election day violence occurs during political campaigns, where they disrupt campaigns of oppositions considered strong enough to jeopardize the ruling party's chance of winning

the election. Election day violence is usually carried out on the election day and most time involves intimidation, assaults and kidnapping of strong opposition party members. The post-election usually comes when the result did not really reflect the voting pattern of the electorates (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Omotola, 2010; Onapajo, 2014). To cap it all, Teshome-Bahiru (2009) and Dolo (2006) are of the opinion that it is a dangerous adventure to be competing with the ruling party, as incumbents normally harass, intimidate and imprison opposition candidates. This is the rule in Nigeria where the government harasses opposition members with anti-corruption crusade agents in order to frustrate them because they are seen as threats to its victory. Opposition parties are made to compete in a political environment where the ruling party systematically tilts the playing field in its favour through harassment, intimidation, repression, and other tactics in an unequal campaign environment that favours the incumbent (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020).

Furthermore, since the return of democratic rule in Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has always been criticised and accused of rigging elections for the incumbent party. The INEC has always been accused of perpetuating all forms of malpractice just to win elections at all costs for the incumbent government. This is said to be so because the presidency is responsible for the appointment of its chief officials. Omotola (2012) has also described elections under the fourth republic as characterized by incompetent election administration at all stages, with damagingly criticized outcomes. In order to keep control over the electoral arena and solidify their dominance, incumbents frequently support institutional manoeuvres (Kavasoglu, 2022).

Another challenge faced by the opposition political party can be seen in the area of party defection, decamping and carpet crossing. Defections, decampments, and carpet crossings usually occur for a variety of reasons. Personal conflicts, power struggles, crises or division within a certain party, disagreement on the party's position on an issue, the realization of one's personal political ambition, and a sense of threat all contribute to political party defection, decamping, or carpet crossing (Aleyomi, 2013). But some politicians also decamp believing that if they decamp to the ruling party they will not be chased or harassed because they are members of the ruling party and even if they commit any atrocity, their sins will be forgiven.

Another strategy used by the incumbent government to weaken opposition political parties is to increasingly manipulate electoral norms, restrict dissent, and change the constitution to suit their interests and make it fall within the legal framework of the democratic system. They also use the law to reduce the civic or political space and political freedoms in order to crush dissents and disable political opposition, and diminish the power of the democratic system (Burcher & Bisarya, 2017).

Above all, Nigeria's politics has been bedevilled with money, as money becomes the determinant factor of who to be voted for by the electorates. Before now, religion and ethnic cleavages were the major factors but now money has taken centre stage and electorates sell their votes to the highest bidder. Onah and Nwali (2018) view money politics as the degeneration of politics into business ventures in which money assumes the central role of inducing or influencing the electorates to the extent of their participation at all levels of the political process and particularly in electoral contests. This inducement can either be money or material things to both electorates and electoral officials or security agents and the judges who will handle any litigation that may emanate from the election (Tunde, Lawal, & Muhammed, 2015). Money politics have hampered genuine contenders to emerge as party flag bearers because he/she does not have the money needed to finance campaigns and at the same time, no opposition who will want to use his personal money against the incumbent government who is using the state resources. Though money is an essential ingredient in politics it has been used negatively in Nigeria and especially to weaken opposition parties as a result of vote buying (Adenuga et al., 2021; Olaniyan, 2020; Onuoha & Ojo, 2018) Ojo, 2008; Tunde et al., 2015).

2.5 Prospects of opposition political party

Having seen the various challenges faced by the opposition political parties, it is, therefore, important to address those issues raised above that will always make the incumbent political party to give a

sense of belonging to the opposition political parties as competitors in the electoral market and not as enemies and provide a level playing field for all political parties in the country.

The merger has become one of the most effective prospects that enhance the chances of opposition political parties in Africa. Examples include the victories by opposition parties in Malawi 1994 and 2014; Senegal 2000 and 2012; Mauritius 2000; Cote d'Ivoire 2010; Tunisia 2015; Nigeria 2015; Somalia 2010; Ghana 2016 and Zambia 2011 among others (Asingo, 2013; Dolo, 2006; Sebudubudu, Bodilenyane, & Kwerepe, 2016; Teshome-Bahiru, 2009). The view of Asingo (2013) and Sebudubudu et al. (2016) made it clear that merger, cooperation and coalition/alliance are most viable and capable of unseating the incumbent or ruling party in any country of the world.

Political parties may consider a merger because of the following reasons:

1. For vote maximisation: This is mostly the case to gain maximum votes during an election. This is achieved through gaining more cabinet posts since many parties have collapsed to form a new one.
2. For effective representation and participation of members: Parties may merge in order to gain better coverage in representing the people and it gives members a wider platform in which to participate.
3. To strengthen their financial base: since each party that is joining the merger will come with its resources, it will help to strengthen the financial base of the new party to finance rallies and campaigns in order to win more votes.

However, though the merger of various political parties is a strategy to wrestle power from the incumbent but not all mergers achieved the desired goal as we have noticed in the past. Again other methods that can be deployed but are not as effective as mergers are dialogue and protest. In addressing these issues, the entire stakeholders in the electoral process need voter education and political education, in order to improve Nigeria's electoral process, as negligence of voter education/political education had been responsible for why incumbent political party weakens opposition political parties to emerge victorious.

3. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the general belief is that opposition political parties are weak, especially in Nigeria. It however argued that the ruling party plays a vital role in weakening the opposition by not providing a level playing field for all political parties to thrive. For the merger of the opposition party to thrive, there is a need to strengthen electoral institutions to be impartial and professional in discharging their duty. As argued and seen from the results of elections in the fourth republic, opposition parties always have prospects in various states of the country but the incumbent/ruling party usually hurts the process by various means including electoral malpractices, violence, intimidation and money which opposition will or may not be able to match. Knowing fully well that opposition political parties help to consolidate, legitimise and deepen democracy, it then becomes vital to address those issues discussed above that will always make the ruling party accommodate the opposition as competitors and not as enemies in the political market.

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