

## **EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA (2007-2015)**

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### **Abstract**

Experience predisposes us to accept that in Africa and particularly Nigeria, opposition political parties are easily suppressed upon and factionalized via the political antics of the ruling party and its stooges within such opposition political party and thus that seemingly diminishes its internal cohesion and efficacy. Thus this study raises concerns on the ability of Africa's opposition parties playing out their roles effectively in the democratic enterprise and overall political development of the countries within the continent. Over the decades this has remained a pipe dream, because myriads of questions persist pertaining to the substance, quality and effectiveness of opposition political party in Africa's nascent democracies. The study adopted Marxist theory of post-colonial state, longitudinal research design, qualitative method of data enquiry and analysis. The study found out that Africa and Nigeria in particular is still at the nascent stage in her political process and most of the existing political parties in the continent are apparently bereft of clear ideologies, which places great burden on their ability to act as credible oppositions as well as a force in driving democratic sustainability and overall political development of their various countries. The study recommended that virile political institutions, ideologically driven political parties will in no small measure help to engender the consolidation of democratic governance. Leaders and operators of opposition parties should make dividends of good governance accessible to the masses by acting as watch dog in checkmating the activities of the party in government through effective, credible and proactive means.

**Key words: Effective Opposition Party, Political Development, Democratic consolidation, Good governance, and Nigerian experience.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In democracies all over the world, political parties occupy vital positions and consequently play major roles. Political party may be likened to the vehicle which conveys aspirants and candidate to various political or public offices. Consequently, instances of zero party system in Africa are elusive as it is unpopular. Scholars have further identified three party systems with universal applicability, namely; one party system, two party system and multi-party system. Of all three party systems above enumerated, the two and multiparty system holds great compatibility for opposition politics. Given the high predisposition for democratic practices in the quest for good governance across the world, including Africa, political party politics is gradually been institutionalized in Africa and Nigeria in particular; but not without its challenges.

Where there is existence of two or multiparty system, it is tangential that there will be opposition political party or parties as the case may be; since all the political parties may not form the government at the same time; even where there may be agreement on coalition. This therefore, makes opposition politics imperative in modern democratic governance; such opposition however, must be effective, credible and proactive to yield the desired result.

Without effective opposition, democratic governance will make little or no meaning and will be far from translating to political development in the long run. Nevertheless, Africa is still confronted by the dearth of effective opposition political party in her quest for democratic consolidation within the continent. This is manifest in the rising number of sit tight regimes and constructive subversion by some African leaders to a one party state; albeit by muzzling, emasculating and suffocating the prospects of effective opposition party in such countries. One would say that the history and experience of African countries with recourse to party politics has been that of violence, oppression, suppression and repression courtesy of colonial bequeathals.

It is in the light of the above, that the role of political party and more importantly so with reference to opposition political party; have remained in the front burner of national, continental and international debates in the last two decades. Several scholars have lent credence by their submissions to this prevailing debate (Pempel, 1990; Huntington, 1991; Diamond and Guenther, 2001).

Noted that in advanced “liberal” democracies such as the United States of America (USA), Canada, France and Australia, political parties are known for playing effective roles as credible opposition especially in check mating the excesses and abuses of democratic norms and principles by the incumbent government and in so doing ensuring good governance practices, respect for rule of law and safeguards of fundamental human rights. In such polities, political parties are respected as pillars of “good” governance.

Conversely, in nascent, fledgling, and apparently “illiberal” democracies predominantly found among emergent Third World Countries of Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean; opposition political party is typically stifled and suffocated by the party in power using state apparatuses and various other means; including sponsoring internal crisis within such opposition political parties in the form of parallel executives and much more. This scenario negatively affects the ability of these opposition parties to effectively play their roles pursuant to democratic consolidation, good governance and overall political development in Africa. Sequel to the above, “good” governance questions are raised in developing democracies – such as Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Gabon and Cote d’Ivoire and many others as noted in literature (Wanjohi, 2003; Doorenspleet, 2003; Rakner & Svansand, 2004).

It is against the backdrop of the above, that this paper is motivated to examine the role of opposition political party in democratic consolidation in Nigeria between 2007 and 2015. Therefore, before we delve fully into the contours of our argument, it is academically expedient for us to lay the required foundation upon which to erect our structure. In the sections that follow this introduction, therefore, we outline the objectives of the study followed by the theoretical framework. The concept of political party and its roles in democratization process will come next. This will be followed by review of opposition party politics and its expectations in a democracy and then the imperative of credible and effective opposition party politics in Africa with reference to Nigeria. Recommendations and conclusion will form the last sections of this paper.

## CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

### Political Party and its Roles

There are several definitions on this important topic. It is essential we examine a few of them. But by and large, a lot of people agree that political parties are organized group of people who come together to pursue specific policies and objectives with the motive of taking control of state power, by acting together as a political unit. Curtis in (Johari, 2008:423) is of the view that political party is notoriously difficult to define accurately because Liberal and Marxist writers differ sharply on this issue. The definition given by Edmund Burke, an English writer and leader was greatly celebrated. He said a political party is "a body of men united for promoting the national interest on some particular principles in which they all agreed" (Chikendu, 2003:42). One thing that is important here is that a political party is a body of men united to promote national interest that they all agreed upon. (Ofoegbu, 1976) gave a clearer picture when he remarked that "a political party is an organisation of like-minded citizen which seeks to promote and advance certain general objectives on which its members agreed", (Chikendu, 2003:42).

Agbaje (1999:195) said "a political party is a group of persons bonded in policy and opinion in support of a general political cause which essentially is the pursuit, capture and retention for as long as democratically feasible, of government and its offices." He went further by quoting (Wilson 1992: 138) "that a political party is a group that seeks to elect candidates to public office by supplying them with a label - a party identification by which they are known to the electorate". In his view, a political party should have three clear variables;

- (1) a label in the minds of its members and the electorates
- (2) an organisation that campaign for candidates seeking elective offices
- (3) leaders that controls the legislative and executive arms of the government.

It is interesting to note that the views of the Americans are different regarding definition of a political party. They view "political party as an instrument of catching power" (Johari, 2008:424). A political party is a platform or machinery for taking part in the struggle for power. Johari went further and declared that "a political party is an agency to mobilize people's support at the time of elections; it is an instrument for aggregation of interest that demands vociferous articulation" (Johari, 2008:424). Grotty said that "a political party is a formally organized group that performs the functions of educating the public ... that recruits and promotes individual for public office and that provides a comprehensive linkage function between the public and governmental decision makers" (Johari, 2008:424).

From the definitions above, it is clear that a political party should have three essential features;

- a) an organisation of individual who have common interest that they all agreed upon
- b) it is an organisation that should struggle for state power and
- c) the members must make efforts to implement the policies and programmes of the party through constitutional means.

The view of Curtis is quite germane in the definition of a political party. He remarked, "Essentially, a party signifies a group of people who hold certain political beliefs in common or who are prepared to support the party candidate, work together for electoral victory, attain and maintain political power" (Johari, 2008:424). Here Curtis stresses the importance of holding a common belief and support for candidates to achieving electoral victory.

Simply put, a political party is a group of persons bonded in policy and opinion in support of a general political cause, which essentially is the pursuit, and retention for as long as democratically feasible, of government and its offices. In other words, a political party is a group that seeks to elect candidates to public offices by supplying them with a label - a party identification - by which they are known to the electorate. Therefore, a political party is composed of a group of people like any other groups or organizations, except that it is distinguished by its unique objective, which, in a democratic setting, is seeking control of government through nominating its candidates and presenting programs for endorsement via the electoral process in competition with other parties.

The Political Bureau (1987) as cited in Oji and Okafor (2007) illustrated the roles of political parties as follows:

- a. Agents of political participation and aggregation of demands: Individuals and groups normally express in discreet terms the functions they want the government to perform for themselves or others. Thus, some people may demand roads and bridges; some may demand free education, and health services, while others may demand subsidized houses or adequate agricultural facility or logistics. The parties normally collate and articulate these demands or interests from which both ideas and programmes arc evolved.
- b. Through the instrumentality of the political parties, political attitudes and behaviour of members could be mobilized more effectively towards the ends and goals of government.
- c. One other major characteristic of a political party is in the area of legitimacy of authority. Political parties are more flexible instruments for winning popular support. Equally in countries where parties exist, it is easier to deal with leadership succession than in countries without political parties.
- d. Sectional religious and ethnic loyalties can be arrested through truly national political parties. Put differently, political parties could help in the achievement of national integration.
- e. Avenue for Criticisms of Government policies: In the competitive environment of politics, political parties also serve as vital sources of opposition and criticisms, both inside and outside government. By broadening the space for political debates, they help in educating the electorates and ensure that government policies are more thoroughly scrutinized.
- f. Other specific roles of political parties include, spreading general understanding of the national philosophy and national objectives, drawing up and canvassing strategies for attaining national objectives; sustaining the fraternity of the people, examining entirely government politics and their implementation in the light of the national philosophy and national objectives and inculcating national pride, self- reliance in members, representatives and in the public generally (See Nigeria's Political Bureau Report, 1987 : 125).

In the overall context, therefore, political parties remain the only agency for obtaining and maintaining political power. As such, they must gain popular support, provide political leadership and respond to society's interests. Parties organize (or aggregate and articulate) public opinions and popular demand and communicate these to the decision making centers

of government. Parties are therefore indispensable in a democratic political system. But the effectiveness of the party system depends largely on the level of political culture in a country. In the advanced countries of the world such as the United States and Britain, the peoples have made a success of party systems. But in the developing climes such as Africa and Nigeria in particular, party politics seem to have been fostering the cleavages and divisions within the society; hence the clamor by the citizens out of exasperation, especially in trouble periods, for the no party option, or even the extreme option of military intervention (coincidentally this is common in Africa).

### **Opposition Party Politics and its Expectations in a Democracy**

Opposition party is a party or group of parties that is not part of the ruling party in government or in the parliament as the case may be. It is normally considered as the second largest party in parliament or a group of coalition parties that fails to capture majority seat to form government. It is more common in the parliamentary system of government and the opposition party has different programmes and ideology they hope to implement with the intention of securing better life for the people. It is noteworthy that political oppositions are quite tolerated in western democracies of Europe and America but not easily so in African countries where they are suppressed and emasculated by the party in power.

The history of party politics in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era. The Clifford Constitution of 1922 cleared the stage for the formation of political parties. Herbert Macaulay seized this opportunity and formed the Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP) in 1923. He was regarded as the father of Nigerian nationalism. Herbert Macaulay won all the entire three seats reserved for Lagos in the Legislative Council of 1923, 1933 and 1938 respectively. Similar rival political parties emerged on the political scene. These were: The Peoples Union (1923), Union of Young Nigerians (1923), The Nigerian Youth Movement (1937), The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (1944), The Northern Element Progressive Associations (1945), The Northern Element Progress Union (1950) The Action Group (1951), The Northern People's Congress (1951), The United National Independent Party (1953), The United Middle Belt Congress (1955), formed through the merger between the Middle Belt League (1950), and the Middle Belt People Party (1953), Borno Youth Movement (1956), The Dynamic Party (1955) and The National Democratic Party of Nigeria and the Cameroons (1958) (Jinadu, 2011).

Culminating in the 1960 independence, there emerged opposition party politics in Nigeria, a role assumed at the time by the Action Group led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. From independence till date Nigeria has predominantly operated multi party state there by giving allowance for existence of opposition political parties. In the enlightened submissions of some scholars, the present engagement of the opposition political parties especially with reference to Nigeria leaves much to be desired (Oyugi, 1994; Makara, 2003; Oloka-Onyango, 2005); in that they help in shaping policy agenda, conducting civic and political education, and in hyping the tempo of the anti-corruption campaign, in alliance with the media.

Prof. Alfred C. Stephan, a professor of government at Columbia University in the United States, considers the role of the democratic opposition in societies – such as Nigeria – where authoritarianism had survived for long before the democratic transition – as not only essential, but also key in deepening democracy.



Stephan as cited in Mohammed (2012) states that by “turning vital ‘non-issues’ into issues”, and also by “creating new structures of participation, transparency and ultimately accountability”, the opposition is indeed helping to deepen democracy. He further enumerates five key functions for the democratic opposition party.

These include:

- a) Resisting integration into the ruling regime
- b) Guarding zones of autonomy against the ruling regime
- c) Disputing the legitimacy of the ruling regime
- d) Raising the cost of authoritarian rule; and
- e) Creating credible democratic alternative.

These functions listed above are by no means exhaustive.

The democratic opposition is also expected to offer political alternatives; to articulate and promote the interest of the voters; to offer alternatives to the decisions proposed by the government and the major representatives (in the National Assembly); to improve parliamentary decision-making procedures by ensuring effective debate, reflection and contradiction; to scrutinize the legislative and budgetary proposals of the government; and, to ensure stability, legitimacy, accountability and transparency in the political process.

Other public commentators have identified the functions of the opposition in similar or different languages. These include holding the government accountable through the promotion of responsible and reasoned debate so as to provoke national conversation and push democratic discussion to a higher level, and working with media and civil society organizations to monitor and improve public governance.

### **Democratic Consolidation**

Essentially, democratic consolidation is the process by which a new democracy matures, in a way that it becomes unlikely to revert to authoritarianism without an external shock, and is regarded as the only available system of government within a country. This is the case when: no significant political group seriously attempts to overthrow the democratic regime, the democratic system is regarded as the most appropriate way to govern by the vast majority of the public, and all political actors are accustomed to the fact that conflicts are resolved through established political and constitutional rules (Linz, & Stepan, 1996). The notion of democratic consolidation is contested because it is not clear that there is anything substantive that happens to new democracies that secures their continuation, beyond those factors that simply make it 'more likely' that they continue as democracies. Many scholars have attempted to explain the factors that are responsible for democracies consolidating, which has led to the emergence of different ‘consolidation theories’ in the academic literature. Unconsolidated democracies often suffer from formalized but intermittent elections and clientelism (O'Donnell, 1996).

Examples of democratically consolidated states are United States, Western Europe, France etc. For instance, the countries of Western Europe serve as examples of fully consolidated democracies. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands, are in the spot light, as both are very unlikely to revert to authoritarian monarchies, because they have adopted the aspects that are

often associated with fully consolidated democracies: There is adherence to the rule of law, they frequently organize fair and competitive elections and they have a developed civil society.

Mexico which is another example of a developing state that has somewhat consolidated her democracy. Albeit, whether Mexico is a fully consolidated democracy is the source of much debate, but the process has clearly begun in the country. After over 70 years of authoritarian rule under the Mexican PRI party, Mexican politics have transitioned into a competitive, multi-party system (Wikipedia, 2021). Their courts are independent and may check the powers of other branches of government, and media censorship is slowly loosening its grip. Recent political results, such as those of the 2018 presidential election, suggest that the PRI is unlikely to regain sole power over the country.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The Marxist theory of post-colonial state forms the bases of this paper. The use of this theory is justified due to its relative proficiency in the study, analysis and understanding of postcolonial political economy. This theory was mainly propounded by Karl Marx; who posited the following attributes of the neo-colonial state:

- i) That class domination remains the central tendency of a postcolonial state;
- ii) That primitive accumulation is perpetrated by local bourgeoisies using state power and with the collaboration of some external forces in the metropolis; and
- iii) That post-colonial states are mainly renter states parcelled out to individuals that makes use of state power and its apparatuses for self-aggrandizement.

The core assumption of this theory is that postcolonial states are reflections of the colonial external forces that ab initio dominated it. The theory of postcolonial states perceives the state as both the source of economic power and an instrument of accumulation of economic power as the state is the major source of access to wealth, prestige and power. This was the central orientation propagated by colonialism and which was at the same time bequeathed to the new crop of leaders that took over the control of state apparatus at inception of independence in the various African countries.

In the light of the above, Nigeria epitomises a case illustration of a postcolonial state and is marked by these attributes and trappings highlighted above. The struggle for political power represents the highest level of manifestation of political party activities within which opposition politics is consequential. In this interplay, there is tendentious chaotic relationship as a result of deep rooted lack of capacity by the postcolonial states to moderate the struggles which are pronounced between and among the various political parties and the government in power.

The outcome of the above is zeroed down to winner takes all, which is the central tendency of politics in Africa and Nigeria in particular. In this scenario, opposition politics is by all means neutralised using various means possible as the party in power seeks to maintain its rigid hold on state power for the political and economic benefits of its members. This theory of the postcolonial states therefore, holistically undergirds and explains the ramifications of socio-economic cum political relations in postcolonial states particularly Nigeria within which the study is domesticated.

## DISCUSSIONS

### **Role of Effective Opposition Party Politics in Democratic Consolidation: the Nigerian Experience**

Political opposition performs laudable roles in political development across the globe. And despite the tedious operational environment in Africa and Nigeria in particular; opposition politics still holds great prospects for political development in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. They check the abuse of power and dictatorial tendencies of the ruling party or government. It makes the government to be responsible and accountable to the people. It is naturally a salient feature of a democratic government. Criticisms are not the sole duty of the opposition; they co-operate with the ruling party at committee meetings and contribute to debates on crucial issues of national importance. The oppositions also protect the interest of minority and serve as an alternative ruling government when there is need particularly in a parliamentary system of government. The opposition also co-operate with the ruling government during national crises, emergencies, war, etc. When criticisms from the opposition are not constructive, it tends to create confusion, and weaken government. However, a responsible government should tolerate the existence of the opposition party in order to keep the ruling party on track.

In assessing the role of effective opposition party politics in Nigeria, it is needful to make reference to the Nigeria fourth republic and the events following the 2011 general election that saw the emergence of Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and culminating in the 2015 general election that brought the All Progressives Congress (APC) into power. The Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), only emerged as the country's leading opposition party after the April 2011 general elections, before that the party played the role much earlier (albeit under a different name), after the then leading opposition party, the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP), was virtually emasculated by the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) which co-opted it into governance with some thin carrots and effectively silenced it (Mohammed, 2012).

Therefore, at a time the ACN could boast of only one state (Lagos State), yet it remained the undisputed voice of the Nigerian opposition, putting the government of the day on its toes and resisting every attempt to turn Nigeria into a one-party state – which the PDP has stated, time and again, as its objective.

By the time ACN emerged as the leading opposition party after 2011 general elections, it gradually proved itself worthy in performing this role. The ACN has been guided by the highest principles, based on the recognition of the centrality of the opposition not only in ensuring the survival, deepening and expansion of democracy and political development, but also in preserving human liberty and guaranteeing justice, particularly in a plural state and society such as Nigeria.

As the 19th Century two-time British Prime Minister – who was the leader of opposition in the British parliament in the intervening period – Benjamin Disraeli, stated, “No government can long be secure without a formidable opposition.”

One may say here, therefore, that without fear of contradiction, the ACN tried as much as humanly possible to function within the ambit of the enunciated roles of an opposition political party. In other words, while one cannot claim that role of an opposition political party in the last 13 years has led to the achievement of these targets, we may confidently state



that through releases, interviews and interventions the opposition party sought to speak to all these functions of a democratic opposition.

On many occasions, the party has turned non-issues which are critical for democracy, liberty and justice, into issues. Through media interventions, the opposition party created the possibilities of greater participation by Nigerians in the governance of the country, while at the same time canvassing for greater transparency and accountability in the affairs of government and public institutions. There is no doubt that this is a positive contributor to the political development of Nigeria and by extension Africa.

It is worthy of note that from 1999 till the emergence of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) led by Senator Bola Ahmad Tinubu, Nigeria functioned under seemingly semi-authoritarian presidents and a dominant (one party) PDP-led Federal Government. This was obviously not good for democratic sustainability.

The effective opposition role assumed by the ACN immediately after 2011 election resulted in the following achievements, which engenders political development in Nigeria:

- a) Ensuring that the opposition party is not eclipsed or incorporated by the ruling regime and ruling party: recall the attempt by the Jonathan Administration to form 'Unity Government' after the 2011 general election, and the principled stand taken by the ACN not to have anything to do with it;
- b) Despite the dominance of the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party, the opposition ACN created and fortified areas of autonomy both for the party and other forces and formations in the country;
- c) In the midst of real and perceived threats, the opposition disputed the legitimacy of the ruling party in its violations of the public trust and subversion of the commonwealth;
- d) By constantly exposing, and alerting Nigerians to the excesses, incompetence, inefficiency, ineffectiveness, wastage and abuses of the ruling party and its government(s), particularly at the center, the opposition made the ruling party much more uncomfortable in their violations of public trust;
- e) Through constant exposition and publicity of the activities and views of the ACN, it was able to help in the creation of a credible alternative to the ruling party and regime at the center and in most of the states.

Furthermore, the ACN acted in ways that confirm the fundamental functions of the democratic opposition in the 21st Century, as identified by the European Commission for Democracy through Law (otherwise called Venice Commission). These functions include: to offer political alternatives; to articulate and promote the interest of the voters; to offer alternatives to the decisions proposed by the government and the major representatives (in the National Assembly); to improve parliamentary decision-making procedures by ensuring debate, reflection and contradiction; to scrutinize the legislative and budgetary proposals of the government; and, to ensure stability, legitimacy, accountability and transparency in the political process (the Venice Commission as cited in Mohammed, 2012).

It must be noted that it was through the instrumentality of the effective opposition roles of the Action Congress of Nigeria that the All Progressives Congress (APC) emerged and wrestled power from the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) in the April 2015 general election.

PDP was in total control until the period before the 2015 general election when a good number of its leading members in various positions switched their loyalty and moved from the mainstream political party to form a formidable opposition which gave birth to the All Progressives Congress (APC). The APC emerged as a result of the merger of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the CPC led by General Muhammadu Buhari Rtd. and remnants of ANPP led by Chief Ogbonnaya Onu as well as faction of APGA led by Owelle Anayo Rochas Okorochoa of Imo State. The APC manifested itself as a formidable opposition to the ruling PDP by capitalizing on the perceived and imagined weaknesses of the then ruling party; especially the issue of corruption to attract public support, which made it seem like a credible alternative to the people's seemingly long anticipated change. It was consequent upon the perceived seriousness and apparent doggedness of the APC that emerged prior to the 2015 general elections that the Nigerian political scene witnessed landmark defections of governors and members of the National Assembly which further boosted the pedigree of the APC and led her to electoral victory in the April 2015 general elections.

### **Recommendations**

With recourse to the major inferences made in this paper, it is apt to proffer the following recommendations, which are expected to help in the enhancement of effective opposition politics in Africa and Nigeria in particular;

- a) There is need to put a legal framework in place for the purpose of strengthening the existing political parties in the country. A situation where there are over 91 political parties in a country and less than five are effective is an insult on multiparty system and should be checked to encourage effectiveness.
- b) There is need to check the rising incidences of sit tightism, one party system and authoritarian regimes in some Africa countries using legal reforms.
- c) The need for effective mass media involvement in strengthening the role of opposition politics requires urgent attention. Relevant legal regime need be put in place to safeguard such involvement.
- d) It is needful to promote civil society engagement as partners in the quest for democratic consolidation and good governance.
- e) In Nigeria there is need to encourage ideology based political parties. There is therefore legal need to empower the electoral umpire to integrate this as part of the requirements for registration of political parties in the country.

### **Conclusion**

Where there is no political party it is either that there is no democracy or that democracy in such country is a charade. Nigeria has long history of political party development, dating back to colonial era. Along the same line is opposition party politics, which however became pronounced in the first and fourth republic. The roles of political party and more so that of opposition political party is well documented in literature and already highlighted in this context.

It is the conclusion of this writer that no opposition party can perform its role creditably without the media and civil society organizations. They have been veritable partners, standing shoulder to shoulder with opposition voice all the way. They help to enhance robust debates on key issues. The country stands to get more from the media when we take them as a critical partner in the task of nation building, rather than merely as an instrument for the dissemination of news. Nigeria nay Africa needs credible and effective opposition politics as

a necessary prerequisite for political development across the countries of the African continent. The study recommended that virile political institutions, ideologically driven political parties will in no small measure help to engender the consolidation of democratic governance. Leaders and operators of opposition parties should make dividends of good governance accessible to the masses by acting as watch dog in checkmating the activities of the party in government through effective, credible and proactive means.

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