

Problems of Democratic Governance in Nigeria: The Way Forward

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ABSTRACT This paper looks at the problems of democratic governance in Nigeria and the manners these problems which constitute fundamental challenges to the Nigerian fledgling democracy can be surmounted. A qualitative research method of gathering data through secondary source was adopted. The primary inferences and deductions drawn revolve around the apparent problems that bedevil the democratic processes in Nigeria. In this light, the paper concludes that for there to be significant improvement in the democratic processes, amongst others, Nigerian political leaders should change their dispositions in the handling of state affairs. Finally, the paper makes some recommendations that would assist in promoting democratic practice and culture in the country.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a global maiden which every nation woos. The democratic craze is sweeping across the whole world, from the nation states in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to Africa and Asia. It shows that democracy has gathered momentum across the globe as a result of its immense advantages and by implication because of the negative consequences of bad governance (Bello-Imam 2004:1). Consequently, democratic movement all over the world is among other things, an insistence on expression of the will of the people. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa has no choice than to align itself with the rest of the world on the democratic crave. However, Nigeria has not been so lucky to be democratized. It has had long tortured history of dancing around democracy but has never gotten it right. This is largely due to some challenges amongst which are lack of large scale free, fair and credible election; lack of freedom of speech and publication; refusal to accept defeat in elections by political gladiators; corruption and attitude of political office holders to corner the wealth of the nation; inobservance of rule of law; and long military rule (Adekola 2010: 1). The relatively free, fair, and credible elections in Nigeria in April 2011 show that light is beginning to show at the end of the tunnel.

The democratic events in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nigeria under President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and Late General Sanni Abacha among many others show that the democratic struggles and democratization in Africa have been informed by different and sometimes conflicting objectives and strategies between the elites and the masses. (Okoro 2007). Contrary to popular participation, democracy in the African context means the ability of few people to effectively take control of the powers and authorities of governance with or without the choice of those they represent. In order for democracy to be meaningful it must be characterized or underlined by the principles of openness, representation, accountability, transparency and the defense, protection and preservation of individual and group rights (Vanhanem 1990).

African people through democratic struggles and decades of sacrifices have rejected authoritarianism. To that extent, democracy is viewed as the only framework through which development can be facilitated in Africa. Ironically, Ojo (2005) observed that, the democracy in the African context serves the interest of only the ruling class.

Objectives

This paper seeks to look at the democratic processes in Nigeria. It attempts to find out is-

sues and phenomena that characterize the processes and which bedevil free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria, particularly, since the re-introduction of democracy in 1999. Against this background, the paper further attempts to make recommendations towards the promotion of ideal democratic culture, idiosyncrasies and behavioural patterns.

PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

Over the years, the Nigerian government has failed to harness the vast human and material resources at its disposal to break the cycle of poverty and autocracy that has characterized it since independence in 1960. Thus, the Nigerian state has been constantly struggling between the forces of democracy and authoritarianism, and characterized by 'the push for development and the pull for underdevelopment, the burden of public corruption and the pressure of accountability' (Kesselman et al. 1996: 616). And, it has 'deviated from the known curve of consolidation to de-consolidation' (Odion-Akhaine et al. 2007: 1). This is traceable to the fact that Nigeria is one of the colonial legacies in the African continent. As an offshoot of the colonial praetors, the Nigerian state retains parts of the authoritarian ethos. Rather than being at the service of the people, it is in the service of the ruling oligarchy (Fagba-debo 2009: 1).

On October 1, 2011 the Nigerian state celebrated 51 years of independence and specifically, on the 29th of May, 2012 celebrated thirteen years of democracy.

For many, it is a fresh period of sober reflection and stock-taking. But the question likely agitating the minds of majority of Nigerians is: After over a decade of democracy, does the nation have any cause to celebrate? Expectedly, the answer is neither here nor there as it depends on which side of the divide one belongs. For optimists, the process could be deemed to be on course and there is every reason to pop champagne. Those in this school of thought believe that having come this far without interruption from the military the fledgling democracy could be safely said to be gradually and steadily taking roots in the nation. To such people, it does not matter the challenges the process has had to contend with all these years. Arguably, majority of those who would share

this view are government functionaries or those who may have held one position or the other since 1999 when democracy was re-introduced in Nigeria. But for the pessimists, rather than celebrate, the situation calls for worry. The nation, in their estimation, has nothing to show for practicing democracy this long. For them, from one sector to the other, Nigeria has arguably fared even better under the protracted military administration. The thinking of those in this group is that the standard of living has worsened under the democratic dispensation. However, in appraising the journey so far, there are several parameters to put in perspective (Jega 2001)

The classification of democracy is problematic in the sense that it has been the subject of immeasurable interpretations by scholars over the years. One school emphasizes the existence of socio economic equality in society as a fundamental condition for the successful functioning of democracy (Monshipouri 1995: 15). Others see it in the light of its etymological sense as the rule of the people (Oyedele 2006: 90). In essence, therefore, a democratic system is judged according to the degree of its commitment to the ingredients of democracy. Democracy thrives where people freely stand for election and vote during election; where there are periodic elections based on universal suffrage; where freedom of speech, publication and association is allowed; where the government and its agents adhere to the rule of law; where majoritarian rule is maintained; where there is acceptance of opposing views; where elections conducted are free, fair and credible; where defeated leaders accept defeat freely in an election; where succession process is smooth and not problematic; where the individual is allowed to freely make his/her choice; and where the process of election is competitive among the political parties. If all these tenets, elements, and parameters are adhered to, a government can be regarded as being democratic.

In addition to the problem of election violence, the phenomenon of corruption makes Nigeria a fertile ground for fraudulent electoral processes. Not only officials of the electoral commission but also law enforcement agents, members of the judiciary and even voters are exposed to the strong and seemingly overwhelming temptation to taste the forbidden fruit of corruption which threatens the electoral process and its

outcome. Consequently, the challenges that face Nigeria as a nation cannot be met without a credible and competent leadership. A credible and competent leadership cannot emerge through an electoral process riddled with corruption and violence. This is why the general elections in 2011 are crucial to the country. It largely helped in re-claiming its nickname as “giant of Africa”; and now Nigeria is positively assessed amongst its African neighbours and international bodies. Nigeria which has attained 50 years was until recently not able to have successful regular elections. The Nigeria irregular election rather than regular was, to a large extent, masterminded by the Armed Forces. Military regime is an aberration to democracy, but the violation of the tenets of democracy by politicians prompted the military intervention in the body politics of the country (Obasanjo 1999).

One of the proofs of the loopholes in the electoral process in Nigeria is the number of elections that have been voided by the petition tribunals and Appeal Courts since democracy was re-introduced. Some of the issues that have characterized elections in Nigeria are:

- Electoral violence;
- Political intimidation;
- Manipulation of the Electoral Commission and security agencies;
- Multiple voting;
- Hijacking of ballot boxes;

Vote-buying (Haruna 2003: 7). And the inability of the National Electoral body to manage logistics as it obtained in the just concluded July Gubernatorial elections in Edo State.

Analysts are also not comfortable with political party development in Nigeria. Progressively, the opposition is gradually going into extinction. Whereas it made impact in 1979 and 1999 through the coalition of forces between the then All Peoples Party (APP) and Alliance for Democracy (AD), it was not so in the 2003 general election. The PDP has succeeded in clipping the wings of the opposition and many insist that it is not healthy for democracy and good governance.

In a nutshell, the Fourth Republic witnessed the coming of President Olusegun Obasanjo as the elected President of this country, Nigeria, in May 1999. The Judiciary has been relatively demonstrating its responsibilities to defend the provisions of the constitution. In 2007 elections, there were problems of proof of multiple thumb

printing and ballot stuffing. The services of the foremost Israeli finger print expert who supervised a team of 10 other experts, who essentially crossed-checked some thumb prints on the ballot papers in selected states across Nigeria discovered multiple thumb printing. In each of the state surveyed, they discovered shocking evidence of extensive multiple thumb printing—hundreds and thousands in some locations. In some locations in Osun State, especially Ife constituencies, the expert found that over 80% of votes cast for Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the Gubernatorial, Senatorial and State House of Assembly elections were full of multiple thumb prints, (Adekola 2010: 317).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars and writers have described the Nigerian political scene in varied uncomplimentary manner. Such derogatory descriptions, to some extent, reflect the nature of the Nigerian State. Odion-Akhaine et al. (2007: 10), described the “Nigerian political turf” as bizarre. Kesselman (1996: 616) wrote: “Nigeria today remains essentially an unfinished state characterized by instability and uncertainties”. Ameh (2007), likens the Nigerian State to a diabetic patient whose excess sugar in the blood stream served no positive purpose. According to him:

Nigerians are definitely suffering in the midst of plenty, or how do you describe perennial fuel scarcity in a country that is the sixth largest exporter of crude oil; lack of potable water in a country with thousands of kilometers of coastline (when landlocked and arid countries have gone beyond this primordial human need) or is it the problem of power supply in spite of our huge natural gas reserve again reputed to be one of the largest in the world?

To Uhunmwuango and Epelle (2009), “Nigeria is a truculent African tragedy”. Sklar (2006: 100) sees Nigeria as a country where dysfunctional politics have drained its potentials for greatness and ability. Odion-Akhaine et al. (2007) describes Nigeria as a country that lacks the capacity for change saying:

Nigeria is not working. The citizen class is agonizing. Two new developments underline this point. One, the fuel queues have returned to the streets of Lagos and several other provincial capitals in the country. Oil, which is the river between, has become a curse on the country and its people. The country's rulers have been un-

able to manage it and ensure that it reaches the end users. Rather, they have managed it to the extent that it enriches their pockets (Odion-Akhaine et al. 2007).

Abati (2007) specifically identified Nigeria as a country where the political leaders would not allow the institutions of state to function efficiently because this would have made it difficult for them to hold as much power as they do:

It is as if the chief task of governance has been the frustration of public institutions. The effect has been the flowering of the politics of personality. Too many so-called leaders wielding the powers of life and death and sounding like the oracle on subjects in which they lack knowledge and competence. We do not have quality schools that can produce the strong breed of human beings that can compete with the best from any part of the world in terms of skills and ideas. To get quality education for your child, you need to send him or her abroad. We want foreign direct investment, but our roads are bad, there is no regular electricity supply, the railways is dead. The starting point for any development agenda is the provision of infrastructure, (Abati 2007).

Recent reports on corruption in Nigeria revealed that corruption and related crimes in the country have attracted an annual revenue loss of \$25.76 billion to the nation in the last five years. On a daily basis, Nigeria is reported to be losing about \$70.575, 342 to corruption and related crimes, (ThisDay 2004: 6). Also, a well-known non-governmental organization, Transparency International (TI), projected Nigeria in its corruption perception index (CPI) as being the third most corrupt nation in the world (131st of 133 countries' surveyed).

On corruption in Nigeria, the report says:

Every single responsible institution in Nigeria is corrupt and has failed to appreciate fully the obligations upon it to do something concrete about corruption. This is to the extent that politicians, government officials, the police and, most saddening of all, the civil society in Nigeria, have all failed to present a genuine attempt to improve the negative image of the country as far as the phenomenon of corruption is concerned. Consequently, the effects of corruption on the state and the society in general are so devastating to the point that the nation's political structures have significantly

lost their capacity to perform their constitutional functions (ThisDay 2004: 6).

Just like majority of Nigerians, the international community is beginning to show interest in the democratic process. The situation has impacted on the image of the nation in several ways. In the glamorous summit of the recent 20 world leading economies known as G-20 summit, Nigeria, the most populous black nation in the world was not invited. Of course, it is inconceivable to imagine that Nigeria qualifies for the meeting as the right of attendance is earned or conferred on beneficiary countries. Besides, the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, had visited two African countries, including Ghana, but Nigeria was not even mentioned in the first official visit of the first black American President. In the estimation of many, the treatment being meted out to Nigeria by the international community has a lot of negative implications.

The categorization of Nigeria as a fragile state is worrisome. Nigerians know that this country used to be much better than what it is in terms of democracy, governance, security, employment, education, health and social amenities, among others. But then, democracy, since 1999, was expected to change things for the better and to improve the lives of Nigerians. So far, not much has been gained. But there is hope that things will improve if the political gladiators in their usual quest for power do not turn the political environment into another theatre of absurdities. Lamentably, in spite of the overwhelming statistics and glaring features of poverty and the avoidable problem in the democratic process, government officials continue to defend failure of governance (Bello-imam and Obadan 2005).

Political watchers also insist that there was a retrogression rather than progression in the democratic process save the April 2011 and July 2012 elections. Since 1999, every election had been trailed by one controversy or the other. The process was far from being fair and had been characterized by rigging, ballot snatching and stuffing, brigandage and all manner of violence. Many were worried that the system got worse since 1999. Their position was based on the fact that Obasanjo's election in his first tenure was relatively conducted under a free and fair atmosphere. In 2003, many Nigerians perceived the election as a charade as so many aspirants and

even voters were disenfranchised. But the situation was compounded during the 2007 general election. The election, arguably, is the worst in the history of the nation. However, in the estimation of many, democracy in the country is gradually being credible, free, fair, and transparent as in other developing countries such as Ghana and South Africa.

The 2011 general elections were crucial for the progress and stability of our nation. With the performance of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in the April 2011 and July 2012 elections, one is optimistic that Nigeria has come of age. The period tested the level of the democratic spirit we have so far imbibed in our journey to nationhood. We have learnt since the democratic dispensation that economic development depends on democratic advancement that derives from a good electoral process (CBCN 2010). Many believe that despite the hiccups, the nation has relatively improved in the area of infrastructural development. Also for practicing democracy, Nigeria has removed the pariah status it had under the long years of military rule. The thinking of optimists is that the nation is gradually but steadily consolidating on the democratic process. There are signs of further progress in line with the enthusiasm and commitment that often accompany moments of change. Reforms of the political and constitutional machinery, bureaucracy, economic and social structures are still in progress. In her political and constitutional experience and developments, Nigeria has passed the classical phase. She is now making progress, though not without considerable difficulties and challenges, through the later years of the human relations phase. Hopefully, in no distant future, she will reach the dawn of the systems phase, now in vogue in the industrialized countries of the world. The transition to civil rule is on-going which is hoped to be completed successfully as the Fourth Republic is now firmly in place and there are definitely pointers in the right direction.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent from the assessment of democratic development and its attendant challenges that the country had wobbled democratically since it had remained a mere civilian government and not a true democratic government. The

political leaders are not altruistic and have a vision of self aggrandizement that run counter to the aspirations of the people. While Nigerians are languishing in poverty, their rulers are reveling in obscene affluence.

Nigeria was ousted from Commonwealth of Nations because they could not recant their violation of fundamental human rights. Where does one start to expose violation of human rights in the country? Educationally, socially, physically, materially, emotionally and democratically Nigeria has a long way to go. But all hope is not lost. Change is constant. There may be changes if some strategies and measures are adopted and implemented by all stake-holders. Essentially, the urgent need for political leaders to change the ways and manners state affairs are dispensed cannot be overemphasized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Notably, there are basically key areas in which there should be policy concern in relation to the democratization exercise. The first has to do with the electoral body. How can Nigerians truly select an objective, representative and public inspired electoral agency? Previously, it was said that several members of the national electoral body were card-carrying members of some political parties, this shows outright partisanship. Adequate arrangements should be made to prevent this. The second is the issue of party registration. The limit placed on number of political associations to be registered greatly restricts the ability of people to freely express themselves through party formation. The role of the electoral body should be restricted to party identification rather than registration. Interestingly, the body has addressed an aspect of this. Ironically, many parties were recently de-registered for failure to field candidates and win election. Furthermore, the electoral body should put its house in order to sufficiently address the issue of logistic that usually rears its head at every election.

Besides, the Institutional safe-guards for corruption control, outside the framework of the recently enacted Anti-corruption Act, are quite weak. There is, for instance, no protection for those who expose corruption. There is the issue of oversight function that the National Assembly plays. Here, there is need for a well-articulated policy framework that will address the role

of the Assembly in this regard. The Executive sees it as contravening the principle of separation of powers. This should not be the attitude. The Executive needs appropriate re-orientation. In addition, there should be increased civil society initiative to monitor and ensure accountability in public service delivery. This will make civil society and politicians alike to be vigilant and alive to their respective responsibilities. Finally, there is need for a planned programme of reform, re-orientation and revitalization of the military to be primarily conscious of their traditional responsibility of territorial protection against external aggression and not incursion into state politics.

The federal government should put adequate paraphernalia in place to address the current security threat ravaging the system. Democracy blossoms better under a peaceful environment. All political office holders, particularly the ruling party should imbibe the spirit of accepting opposing views. Opposition should also learn the spirit of giving constructive and objective criticism to the policies and programmes of the ruling party. The three arms of government - legislative, executive and judiciary should be fully independent, financially and otherwise. This will enable proper execution of the principle of checks and balances. Thus, it will reduce to a large extent the discretionary use of executive powers and abuse of the constitution. It is recommended that all politicians, the electoral commission, law enforcement agencies, all other government bodies and private individuals should dispense their responsibilities within the societal laws and accepted traditions towards the achievement of a sustainable democracy.

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